John Whitberg
The Man with the Periwinkle Eyes
Volume IV: Shelter from the Storm

Shelter from the Storm

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Epigraph

“How will they look upon us wingless ones,
Our great aerial children soon to come,
Who even now begin to quicken life
With movement toward their finer element,
And fierce essays against the weight of Time?”

-Rhoda Hero Dunn, *The Aeronauts*

Introduction

This volume is to be the longest in the series, and looks at the era of Kyle's life which he calls "The Medusa Period." So, in essence, this volume is the story of the Medusas, their lives, trials, tribulations, and triumphs. The era covers the period of 1992 up through 2014, and as such, includes a multitude of stories.

Explained at last in this volume will be a few technical concepts, as well as a slow but certain change which was experienced by the participants of Project Phoenix, along with all of Der Bund, due to the ending of the Mars War, as illustrated in the previous volume, which proved to be a monumental shift in galactic politics.

I'm not sure what other concepts I could lay out in this introduction, be they historical or technical, without "spoiling" the volume to follow. I hope that the reader by this point has made an effort to retain "the basics," and has understood that the technical concepts which have not been explained are omitted because I myself do not understand them, and the information in this book is complete as far as I am capable.

This volume covers the initial phase of what may be called "The Medusa Period," from September 1992 up until about 2001.

As usual, be mindful of your triggers, and enjoy the ride.

Chapter 1

"Dad, can we go for a walk?" Max asked, once Andrew's funeral had completed. "I'd like to see the places Drew showed me."

"You boys had time to see things?" Kyle asked with a laugh. "Lead the way. I'll get Jack. What's that under your jacket?"

"It's a surprise," Max said, then gestured vaguely at the dissipating funeral crowd; "I don't believe this is what Drew wants."

"You'd know best," Kyle said with a knowing smile, then turned, gathering Jack and Harune. McKayla Foster wound up coming along as well.

This group, led by Max, suddenly abandoned the mourners for a walk to Andrew's favorite places in Camp Hero, which by now had a considerable population, as in the past year Jimmy had begun repopulating it.

Max showed the group first to a beach, quite well hidden through a heavy thicket and a fence with a hole cut in it. Apparently some of the new batches of children had discovered this beach as well, as there was a ball here waiting, and so, the group played a game of kickball, initiated by Max, who was always clutching whatever was hidden in his jacket.

For most of the rest of the day, the group walked Camp Hero's above ground segment, going everywhere that any of them had memories of Andrew. Jack, for instance, showed them a barracks which had historically belonged to soldiers of the U.S. Marine Corps, where he'd often sent Andrew to hide as a small child, avoiding work sweeps. Harune showed a spot in the woods

where Andrew had taught him how to play poker for the first time. They wandered through many locations, and by the end, everyone was smiling and laughing in remembrance of Andrew.

The tour ended in yet another patch of woods, overlooking the ocean, where there was an overgrown path, off the side of which was a bench. Here, Max at last revealed what was under his jacket.

"Drew's drinking horn!" Max announced, showing off what was indeed a traditional Viking drinking horn, carved from an ox bone and lined with pewter. Max handed the horn to someone and began digging in the bushes behind the bench.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked.

"I'm looking for… this!" Max replied, holding up an ancient, dirtied rucksack, which he opened to pull out a full bottle of Corelian whiskey.

"Drew and I were saving this," Max explained, "and I guess now's as good a time as any. He certainly wouldn't want this to go to waste."

"He's definitely your son," Kyle said, slapping Jack on the back and laughing as he hadn't in quite a while.

Max opened the bottle, and poured a bit of the liquor into the drinking horn. For the next while, the group chatted, drank, and were generally happy, and none paid attention to the fact that they were utterly ruining their funeral clothes. As they were nearing the end of the bottle, and all except Kyle being varying degrees of drunk, McKayla Foster began to sing, and the others fell silent to allow her to.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
We have already come;
'Twas grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead us home.

And when we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Project Phoenix assets, for better or worse, would be nothing without their alcohol and their music. When the song was done, Kyle and the others were able to return to Fort Worden, and if not entirely happy, at least free.

The group hardly walked through the permanent gate and began to slip back to their apartments, as they'd stayed a long ways past curfew, when Jack pulled Kyle aside into the cedar forest a bit.

"Right, then," Jack said resolutely, "I think we'd better wake up our illustrious pilot and get started preparing for that planetary survey my father ordered."

“After you have a very strong coffee, my friend,” Kyle said with a chuckle.

Kyle and Jack thus slipped into Kyle’s apartment, not far behind Harune and Max, who were already brewing coffee. Jack rather collapsed onto the couch, and the family had their coffee by the permanent sunlight of the time bubble Fort Worden sat in. Although no lights would come on, the television and VCR did work, so someone put in a movie. After the movie and several cups of coffee, Jack, Max, and Harune were ready to begin their day. Harune and Max went to work, and Jack and Kyle were to begin planning the planetary survey with David Steinel, who would be required to fly the trio.

After a stop at Jack’s apartment, to allow him to put on his uniform, they at last made it to David’s apartment. As they approached on Jack’s hoverbike, they saw a young lady exiting David’s apartment, looking a bit embarrassed, and laughed at the site. They found David in his kitchen, cooking his breakfast, the door standing open, as most of them were. The time bubble had frozen Fort Worden permanently on a warm spring day, and so doors were closed only when one was at work or asleep, unless one was in the lucky upper crust who had air-conditioned homes. Even under Jimmy, a hierarchy did exist.

“Couldn’t get enough, huh?” David said upon hearing footsteps at his door.

“That’s why you never stand with your back to a doorway,” one of the men said, causing David to spin around in shock.

“It’s your maniacal overlords,” Kyle said, “and we have an op to plan.”

“Eggs?” David asked, as he began plating breakfast, and the three sat to plan the “planetary survey.” As usual, I will not describe the briefing and mission planning itself, but one hurdle stood in the way: they had no environmental suits.

“I’ll ask Tsurabaya,” Kyle said.

“What makes you think he’ll have them?” David asked.

“That man can get anything, I believe,” Kyle said with a chuckle.

“Been that way since we were kids,” Jack explained, “when we had to live on smuggled food at Camp Hero. Yoshiro was one of the best.”

Kyle and the others stood, heading towards their various jobs. At the lunch hour, Kyle made the trek to the armory, asking to see Tsurabaya, who came out to see him in short order.

“Kyle!” Tsurabaya exclaimed, “how are you soldiering up?”

“Well enough,” Kyle said, trying to sound dismissive, “and I need a favor for my new unit?”

“Already? Why am I not surprised?” Tsurabaya laughed. “Anything for a friend.”

“Thank you,” Kyle said, realizing he truly meant it, “I need three Mars suits. I’ll pay you back. Shit, I’ll-“

“What you’ll do,” Tsurabaya interrupted, “is help me with these weapons. We’re getting shipments of all sorts from the Eastern Bloc countries. You’ll help test every single last one.”

“I certainly will,” Kyle said, trying not to grin with delight. This was hardly a punishing task for someone like him.

“I’ll have your suits in four days,” Tsurabaya said finally, and Kyle left.

The four days passed as any normal four days, lengthened perhaps by the anticipation. In this difficult circumstance, Kyle and Jack grew closer as friends than they’d ever been before, and Kyle drew himself closer to his boys, while becoming even more suspicious of the institutions of Project Phoenix, particularly the lack of instruction and general culture of secrecy. He determined that the Medusa Unit would not be run in this fashion, however small and sporadic in its missions it might be.

On the fourth day, Kyle and the boys were leaving the apartment, in formation as always. Kyle found the suits, sitting folded on the porch. He gathered them up and, after saying his usual pre-mission goodbyes to the boys, set out directly for Jack and David's apartments. He delivered the suits, and himself, Jack, and David changed, and headed towards Prometheus, whom Kyle at some point had persuaded to accept David as her pilot. David brought with him a laminated piece of paper.

"Subspace coordinates," David explained, "can't get back home without them."

I suppose it now falls upon me to explain what David meant when making reference to "subspace coordinates." "Subspace" is what most readers would likely know as "hyperspace" or as a "4th dimension." It is best described as a non-physical counterpart to the universe we exist in. All physical bodies and all physical universes have a specific set of coordinates within this non-physical universe or dimension, and certain ship drives allow for entering this dimension and exiting it again at the given coordinates, with proper navigation; and navigation through this universe is infinitely faster than through the physical, as one is not held back by the speed of light. It just so happened that Prometheus's engines were of this variety, and thus she could be navigated through this non-physical universe, known within the Breakaway as "subspace."

It should be noted that very few Terran humans are capable of such navigation, psionically speaking, and most navigators are Gray aliens, making David an outlier - one of the few hundred human navigators in Nacht Waffen out of their hundreds of thousands of ships.

David and Jack were suitably impressed with Prometheus, and she seemed relatively conciliatory to their presence. She was

able to see that Kyle trusted them completely, and even verbally welcomed David as he entered the bridge.

"She speaks German too?" David asked incredulously.

"I think she speaks any language in existence," Kyle said, then to demonstrate, he ordered, in Tatar: "Prometheus, what's the weather like in Cape Town today?"

"Having never been to such a place, I'm unable to answer," Prometheus said in responsive Tatar.

"I have no fucking clue what you just said, but I'm impressed," David laughed, and at last sat in the pilot's seat.

"Don't distract me," David said, "don't want to end up inside a mountain."

With that, David started fiddling with this and that contraption, none of which Kyle had understood or been able to use, and began to navigate. Kyle and Jack then left the bridge, deciding they'd best talk out of David's earshot as to not cause distraction. Kyle gave Jack a partial tour of Prometheus, before she cut in.

"We have stopped, Captain," Prometheus said. "Herr Steinel is requesting you on the bridge for further instruction."

"Thank you, Prometheus," Kyle replied, and he and Jack set back towards the bridge.

It turned out they were parked in orbit of Mars, as could be observed on the massive screens which almost completely surrounded the bridge.

"Alright. Where am I going?" David asked.

"Go towards The Mother of the Desert. Do you know it?" Jack asked.

"I do," David answered, and began angling Prometheus for the destination.

"I don't know it," Kyle said. "What is it?"

"You'll love it," Jack said unhelpfully. Kyle rolled his eyes.

Kyle did "love it," as it turned out. The Mother of the Desert is a massive sandstone statue in the Aonia Terra region of Mars, approximately 1,500 feet in height and 300 feet in diameter, and is an intricately detailed statue of a heavily pregnant Martian indigenous human woman, in traditional dress of sandals, flowing skirt, and long headdress. She is bare breasted, and has her right hand raised above her eyes, shielding from the sun. She stands on a monster plinth, which raises the statue another 200 feet.

"It's incredible," Kyle said, "but why are we here?"

"Beneath the statue is a room," Jack explained, "the walls are all etched with the names of various indigenous settlements. I figure we should head to some and see if any are still inhabited."

"Good a place to start as any," Kyle said, "let's arm up. David, stay on the ship."

"Aye aye, Captain!" David said. It was hard to tell if he was joking.

Over the four days in between the funeral and the trio leaving, Kyle had gotten some weapons, courtesy of Carina Buchner. These were, of course, only weapons which were not cared about anymore, namely Vietnam War surplus, and only a few at that, with only a few boxes of ammunition. Kyle, David, and Jack were to otherwise rely on their psionics, their enhancements, and the ability of Prometheus to extract them, should things get intense. With these conditions, Kyle and Jack gathered some of these meager weapons and alighted via Prometheus's cargo ramp.

Kyle and Jack rounded the monster plinth on which the statue stood, finding a doorway carved out of one side, with a staircase just beyond it, made of the same rock and descending down into the planet. Their weapons at the ready, Kyle and Jack descended the staircase, which eventually opened into a megalithic round

sandstone room. Kyle supposed it must have once been a library, judging by the numerous long, waist-high stone tables and even more shelving units, both of which were of a smooth, marble-like rock, as opposed to the sandstone of the walls of the room. However, the room had clearly been militarily occupied recently, with bits of equipment strewn about.

"Hey, a sonic gun!" Jack exclaimed at seeing what looked at first glance to be an oversized bazooka, however the speaker-like business end revealed it as a sonic gun.

"Now this is useful!" Kyle said; "Does she work?"

"She should," Jack said, "and if not, I bet there's some tools around here. We'll find them after we're done."

Here and there on the walls, engraved in the indigenous human Martian language, were indeed lists of different settlements. Due to the complexities of the Martian language, I'm unsure of how to Romanize or translate it correctly, so I'll say that most of these settlements were named in relation to landmarks and natural features: Underground River Town, White Sand Town, Lilac Town, Father Mountain Town, and numerous others. Jack recognized a number of these landmarks, and thus wrote down their names and approximate locations in his pocket notebook. After cannibalizing the abandoned equipment for weapons and repair tools (likely corporate stock from the 1970s), Kyle and Jack left, returning to Prometheus.

"Alright," Jack said, consulting his list once he and Kyle had returned to the bridge, "I believe the nearest place is Cold Mountain Town. We call it Alpina Mons. Do you know it?"

"I do," David said, "shall we take the scenic route?"

"Yes," Kyle said, "that is the point of this survey, to see the planet."

And so they flew along fairly slowly and low, observing the scenery of Mars through the windows, including all the usual

patches of dense forest, boundless desert, and bomb craters where there once stood military encampments and various types of settlements. One thing that was quite different from the wartime was that there was no unending stream of ships and fighter planes flying overhead. For most of the trip, at least in this region, Prometheus was the only ship in sight.

A while into the flight, Prometheus spoke: "Captain, I'm getting a transmission"

"Accept it," Kyle said, and almost instantly, Emmermann himself appeared on the bridge screens.

"Gentlemen!" Emmermann exclaimed. "I see you're following my orders."

Kyle: "Do we ever do anything else, Sir?"

"I should hope not," Emmermann said with an even grin.

David: "May I ask what this is about, Sir? I'm trying to fly here."

Emmermann: "Then I'll get straight to the point. My orders are updating. I want you gentlemen to buy me an inroad on the planet, for this war of information, which will also become your base of operations. I've already wired the money, you'll have to go to First United Bank of Cydonia."

Jack: "So Neu Wilhelmsburg then. What account do we withdraw from?"

Emmermann: "Mine. It's in the name Carlos Garcia."

Kyle: "You make a shit Spaniard, Sir. Sorry to say."

Emmermann laughed.

Emmermann: "I take it as a compliment, Kyle."

Kyle: "Is that all?"

Emmermann: "No, not quite. The indigenous have these daggers carved from bone. I want one for my collection."

Jack: "I reckon we can manage that, Sir."

Emmermann: "Good. Over and out."

And without so much as waiting for an "over and out" in return, Emmermann hung up the transmission, leaving Kyle, Jack, and David alone once again.

"So, I guess we're going to Neu Wilhelmsburg," David said, and without another word, turned Prometheus around.

"Just where are we supposed to buy this whorehouse, anyway?" Kyle asked. The others laughed.

"They're selling off old buildings everywhere, so I hear," Jack said. "We'll check it out in town."

David tilted Prometheus upward, raising her to a safer height, and then amped up speed, flying her at such a pace that the men reached the Cydonia region in about 10 minutes, at which point David slowed, then tilted Prometheus downward.

"Get a load of this place," David said, and Kyle, who'd never been to this district or province, marveled.

Cydonia, as most readers likely know, is home to the famous "Face on Mars," as well as a number of pyramids. Seen as Kyle did - up close, and not in a photograph which has been altered, it was incredible, and there could be no doubt of the face's status as having been designed, nor of the pyramids of having been built.

"Holy shit," was all Kyle could think of to say.

In the northeast of the region was a spaceport - a massive concrete ring about 12 miles in diameter, covered by a force field dome. David angled Prometheus down, pulling very slowly through the force field, and then stopping. The spaceport was visibly fairly empty, at least the part closest to Prometheus, and the pressure plates which lined the floor of the spaceport were mostly undisturbed.

"Land on a pressure pad and prepare to be boarded. Lower all shields and disable all weapons," a transmitted voice said, and

so David did, landing Prometheus on one of the black pressure plates.

"They weigh the ship and then make sure they can account for every last gram. It's the new security trend," David explained with an eye roll.

Soon enough, the ship was boarded by a few soldiers. The crew had to show their passports, and turn over their weapons to these soldiers until they returned. As their visit to Neu Wilhelmsburg was to be brief, no more than a couple of hours, the soldiers agreed to remain on board Prometheus, so long as one of the crew remained on board and under supervision. As Jack had stayed on the last outing, it was decided that Kyle and David would leave the ship and get the money Emmermann had wired.

The pressure pad that Prometheus had landed on was situated not far from an elevator, which descended onto a street in Neu Wilhelmsburg. The colony was fairly small, Kyle guessed no more than 10,000 residents strong, but beautiful. The buildings were built in the Baroque style of architecture, and the streets cobbled, and even the rock roof had been painted to resemble a "sky," to limited success.

As usual in these colonies, there were no cars and very few trams, with most people walking. Kyle and David found the "First United Bank of Cydonia" building quite easily, and discovered it was set up like any ultra wealthy bank, sleek and classical on the inside with excellent hospitality, even towards these men in already dusty fatigues who didn't even begin to fit in. Thus, Kyle and David were able to carry out their withdrawal quite easily, walking away 700,000 Bundesmarks richer than before.

"You can fuck a lot, with that much money," Kyle said observantly. In spite of the dirty joke inherent in Kyle's wording, he meant it in more ways than one.

“Back to the ship?” David asked.

“No,” Kyle said, “let’s head for a real estate office. We may as well at least know where to look.”

“Good enough for me,” David shrugged, “I think we passed one on our way here.”

David was either wrong, or he and Kyle had a poor sense of direction, but in the end, the men found a real estate office, which was quite small and situated on the street level, behind a large flower market.

“Where did these flowers come from?” Kyle asked a vendor.

“From the greenhouses,” the vendor, a girl with a Hamburg accent, said matter-of-factly. “You’re not from around here, I suppose? They have these enormous greenhouses in the Green Belt. Growing flowers for the rest of us so we’ll look like we’re one of the civilized colonies.”

The real estate office was quite small and crowded. Kyle and David were rather shocked to hear the voices of several Americans in the office.

“What a world,” David muttered, with a hint of bitterness.

Kyle and Jack eventually spoke to a real estate woman who never cracked a smile, and declared that she was not accepting new clients. Instead, she made a list of possible auctions of old buildings, and offered one bit of advice.

“In most places, especially the Green Belt, there’s no provincial law against just setting down a house,” the real estate woman informed.

Kyle and David returned to Prometheus, and found Jack chatting with one of the colonial guards, a gentleman called Horvath. He’d told Jack of a known inhabited indigenous settlement where the men could begin their survey.

“Perfect,” Kyle said, “now, we need to head to the Bundeslager Ernst Jüngel. Do you know it?”

“I can find it for you,” Horvath volunteered, and so pulled it up on his glass pad, which had a full interactive map of Mars, via the “MarsNet,” as it’s often called. David jotted down the coordinates of both it and the indigenous settlement, and it was determined that the indigenous was closer, therefore, their next destination.

Horvath left, and once again David fired up Prometheus.

“How do you actually navigate her?” Kyle asked.

“I tell her where the coordinates are, and she and I construct a map as we go,” David said, “I’m not sure how to explain it much beyond that.”

The indigenous Martian settlement which Kyle and the men visited turned out to be a burgeoning tourist attraction, situated in one of Mars’ many long dead volcanic tubes. It was known as “Beautiful Painting Town,” a name stemming from the fact that the tube it was in was festooned on all sides by massive frescoes of Martian living, some extending from floor to ceiling, about 500 feet.

This place was so new as a tourist attraction that Kyle, David, and Jack had not been expected. The shops were still being set up, and in some cases, still being built or carved from the walls of the dormant volcanic tube. The locals, however, were quite accommodating.

As it transpired, Kyle, Jack, and David stayed in “Beautiful Painting Town” for several days, and gained a good deal of information. The elders of the town laid bare a shocking and overall quite traumatic truth; that no more than 30% of the indigenous human population of Mars, or perhaps 200,000 persons, had survived. Kyle and the others were shown mountains of photographs to prove this, showing still after still of destroyed settlement, mass graves, massacre sites, and destroyed cultural sites. In case there was any doubt, Kyle and

the others were given the negatives of these photographs, which had clearly been taken with an old Kodak. These were all shown to the trio in turns, in a complex of side caves, which was the home of the tribal Chieftess.

"Do what you will to the Insects and the Scaled ones, but do not touch our people anymore," the Tribal Chieftess ordered, in one of Kyle's sessions.

"I don't want to," Kyle said, "but I do have to ask for one thing: your people are supposed to have ceremonial blades, carved from bones. Our… overlord, shall we say, wants one."

The Chieftess rolled her lime green eyes, stood from the rock she'd sat on, and raised her skirt to reveal that she herself had one of these knives, strapped to her leg. She unsheathed it and threw it at Kyle's feet, then without another word, turned and left. Kyle had the good sense to realize this meant the end of the men's time in "Beautiful Painting Town." Indeed, they didn't need to know much more about the indigenous human Martians' situation. Kyle, afterward, never quite admitted to himself his nation's part in these crimes; he chose to blame the Americans, who were indeed also far from innocent.

After their stay at "Beautiful Painting Town," Kyle, Jack, and David continued on to the so-called "Bundeslager Ernst Jüngel." I suppose this requires an explanation of terms. A "Bundeslager" (literally, federal camp) was, in the period of the Mars War, a military safe zone and generally used as a "displaced persons camp" for colonists under attack. These were, by their nature, nearly always temporary, and usually had simple modular buildings. Few lasted more than a few months due to the ever-changing position of the front, however, a few survived the war, including, apparently, this "Bundeslager Ernst Jüngel," which was repurposed after the war for use as a market for old, unwanted buildings.

Prometheus arrived outside the Bundeslager, which, as readers might expect by now, was circular and protected by a force field dome which emanated from the top of a circular concrete perimeter, with a gate at each cardinal points. Quite a few ships were parked beside the Bundeslager Ernst Jünger, crowding around the east gate, apparently the only entrance. Kyle noted, with a hint of pride, that Prometheus was among the largest of these ships, and Prometheus also noted it, though in her case, she was outright gloating.

David parked Prometheus, and all three men alighted, deciding not to take any weapons with them. The men walked towards the opening gate, and as they did so, they saw a large group pushing a number of hovering platforms, stacked high with assorted panels which had clearly been taken from various buildings. Kyle supposed this must be how buildings were transported from the Bundeslager to their new homes, wherever they might be.

At the gate stood several Kruger personnel, their arms mostly replaced by guns, swords, and metal hydraulic arms. These personnel patted down those arriving, scanning passports, and giving directions. As Kyle and the others had no idea what they were looking for, the directions were not of much help, and so they wandered aimlessly among the maze of old modular buildings, each one spray-painted with a lot number for purchase. Kyle, Jack, and David trusted fate to tell them when they'd found the buildings they needed. As it turned out, they were correct, as they eventually found a very large, round, modular building, the top made of glass panels rather than the usual white plastic-like material.

"Holy shit!" Kyle exclaimed. "Is that-"

"The Glass Hub," Jack finished with a growing smile. "We're buying it. That'll be our base."

This unilateral decision on Jack's part was apparently acceptable to Kyle and David, as they didn't argue much. Someone noted the building's lot number, and the men continued their search, as they still needed a proper home to stay in on their ops, at least in their own minds, and so they searched for it. They eventually found one; a rather peculiar modular two-story home, designed to look like a Japanese or Chinese building, the windows all being odd affairs that could only be seen through on one side, with the other, public facing side being covered in images of nebulas and the sort, presumably to preserve privacy. It wasn't very big, but it would have to do. A bigger house would've drained their remaining Bundesmarks. Indeed, at the end, they only had about 5,000 left over, and this was considered cheap, even for two very old modules, especially as these modules came with energy sources.

I suppose it now falls on me to describe the methods by which most homes off-planet are powered. Most homes within Der Bund are powered by tiny plasma-fueled generators, metal and usually spherical, generally about the size of a grapefruit. Each "grapefruit" has about a dozen little glass vials jutting from it at odd intervals, attached via little prongs. These vials are filled with glowing plasma fuel, half of the vials containing green fuel, the other, pink. Every few years, Earth time, these fuel vials wear out and must be replaced, but fortunately, the vials are very inexpensive, and on some planets are provided free of charge to those of low income. The unit itself is typically mounted under a house or in a breaker box on the house's outside for easy access. On a very large house, or one with a great lot of electronics, multiple units may be needed. One notable aspect is that in Der Bund, energy access is considered a human right, even to slaves and prisoners.

As they'd been instructed, Kyle, Jack, and David returned to the entrance, having written down the lot numbers of the buildings they'd picked, then handed them over to a young lady who sat in an office near the entrance. Here, they had to show identification, then hand over the full required amount of money. At this point, a few of the Kruger personnel were dispatched, and the buildings disassembled panel by panel, which were then piled high on hovering platforms brought from somewhere or other. These were then pushed out to Prometheus, with the bolts in boxes, and the panels loaded into Prometheus's ample hold.

"Right," Kyle said, once the hold was loaded; "to the green belt, I suppose."

"Shouldn't we complete the survey? We'll build when we've brought the others," Jack suggested, and Kyle simply shrugged in acceptance. He wasn't especially eager to build the two buildings with just himself, Jack, and David, though all the panels had tiny numbers in the corners, to enable fast assembly.

It was decided next that they'd best carry out some kind of survey on the Martian Ant people and the Deinonychoids, even though they considered this nearly impossible, as most of these populations were reported to have fled underground. But Emmermann had given his orders, and they had to follow them, to the best of their ability.

As it happened, the men saw very few of the Ant People, and only slightly more of the Deinonychoids. They were not on any known maps, and being underground on a planet as unfathomably honeycombed as Mars, to attempt to find them would be virtually impossible, not to mention extremely dangerous. What they were able to determine, however, was that the Ant People were a great deal more advanced than the Deinonychoids. While the Deinonychoids were essentially an Iron Age civilization, the

Ant People possessed motorcycles, automatic weapons, and most likely incubators or artificial eggs, to grow their spiders.

Kyle, Jack, and David had a bit more luck surveying the various non-indigenous alien populations of Mars, at least those north of the equator and in relative proximity to German settlements, as these alien settlements were usually quite clearly marked by the fact that they were beneath domes of rock, rising from the surface. In most cases, these communities would not admit Kyle and company through their doors, however, they were more than happy to produce their energy bills (paid to Der Bund) and their food import orders. Going by this data, almost none of these alien communities had more than 100,000 residents, and most had less than 30,000, with three very notable exceptions, which were all considered no-go zones for the Germans, even in the post-war era.

These three exceptions were thus: the first was an underground city of free synthetics, reportedly escaped from the grasp of the infamous Orion Syndicate, which had existed long before the arrival of the off-world Axis, which according to the single partially successful diplomatic mission sent in 1953, had a population of about two million. All attempts at further relations had been rebuffed militarily, with great success on the part of these synthetics.

In addition to this, there were two so-called "administrative zones" which essentially ruled the entire solar system. One ran by the Draconian Empire, situated in the center of Tharsis Montes, home to about three million Draco aliens, at least according to their own population counts which they handed over periodically. This area was totally inviolable.

The second "administration zone" was run by the species usually referred to in UFO literature (and also German documents) as "Tall Whites." These entities are essentially white

wraiths, between 12 and 15 feet in height, and are responsible for most of the bad which happens within the solar system, or at least were, before the rise of the off-world Axis. These "Tall Whites" were supposed to have a city of 10 million on Mars, accessed from a mountain deep within the Valles Marineris region.

One demographic which Kyle, Jack, David had no trouble surveying was the various human colonists. They were shocked when they added these up (after dropping in at numerous settlements and asking for their populations) and finding that the Solar human population of Mars in late 1992 to early 1993 was no less than 60 million. Of these, it was determined that roughly 41 million were Germans (including Germans of East European diaspora, such as Bessarabia Germans) followed by five million Argentines, four million Japanese, at least two million Americans, and 1.2 million Ukrainians. After this were numerous other ethnic groups of less than a million persons each, including French, Czechs, Hungarians, Taiwanese, Iranians, Slovaks, Vietnamese, Egyptians, and many, many others. While they were nearly all able to speak German as a second language, their cultures, religious affiliations, and politics varied enormously.

As time passed, Kyle, Jack, and David filled in their reports. When they'd surveyed all they could, which took a number of Martian months, they reached their final reports. These were designed to give their final perspective on the issue, from their own points of view.

Kyle, for his part, finished his report with a single word; "Uncertainty."

Author's note. And so it truly began, the so called "Medusa Period." I hope the reader is intrigued by this more "political" chapter, as we enter the "best of" the book.

Chapter 2

Kyle, Jack and David returned to Fort Worden after their planetary survey of Mars, parking Prometheus on her usual beach, to be met by the rest of the Medusas, having been gone about a fortnight, from the perspective of Fort Worden. If they'd been expecting a break of some sort, they were disappointed. After being welcomed back as they'd expected, Kyle observed Franz Steinel pulling aside Jack and Carina Buchner. Kyle approached to hear what was being said. Franz wasted no time in getting to the point.

"I need a new spotter," Franz stated. "If we're to continue operating."

"I might know somebody," Buchner said.

"Yes, let's get it out of the way, before the old spotter's body is even fucking cold," Jack spat, then turned and left.

"Bring your candidate to my apartment tomorrow, Buchner," Kyle said. Buchner merely shrugged and also left. She was a very silent woman, Kyle was realizing.

"Alright," Kyle said to the Medusas who remained standing around on the beach, "we leave again in a few days. All of us, we have a house and bar to build."

"On Mars? I've never been there," Iridia Cheng said.

"Yes. I think you'll like it," Kyle said, realizing he'd have no idea what she'd like. He also realized he'd missed a great deal of work, and would inevitably miss more, and so he must see Jimmy. He set out to do this, along with Jack.

Jimmy, it turned out, was not exactly conciliatory. Not to Kyle and Jack personally, but to Emmermann's overlordship and to the fact that he had no real control over "his own" employees, as he put it.

"Goddamnit! Has the man no sense of shame?" Jimmy kept shouting.

"Would you expect him to, Sir?" Kyle at last eventually asked. To his surprise, Jimmy turned silent and thoughtful, sitting behind his desk.

"You're fired," Jimmy said at last.

"I'm sorry?" Jack sputtered.

"What the fuck?" Kyle said.

"Yes," Jimmy said, "you're now private contractors. All of your group is. You are to move back to Camp Hero. I'll have a house set out, but you'll pay rent, and you'll do jobs we ask. But otherwise, you may no longer live and work at our kindness. I'm sorry."

"25 goddamn fucking years for you bastards, and you're "sorry?" Sorry!" Jack exploded, and began stepping toward Jimmy. Kyle intervened.

"Jack, be reasonable. This is a pretty good gig," Kyle said, knowing that Jack was partially so explosive due to grief. Kyle was, for whatever reason, always able to calm the angriest person down with the slightest touch, so Jack paused and breathed instantly.

"How do you expect us to pay this rent?" Kyle asked.

"However you can. If you can't pay it, you'll have to leave our protection altogether," Jimmy said firmly, then began scribbling on a piece of paper, which he handed back to Kyle and Jack after a moment.

"These are Camp Hero's subspace coordinates, for your navigator. You may pack tonight and leave tomorrow." Jimmy said.

Kyle as it happened, still carried the remaining money which he, Jack, and David had received on the trip. Kyle took a wad of this and placed it on Jimmy's desk.

"There's our rent. We'll get to Camp Hero when it's convenient." Then, turning to Jack, he added; "Come on. We have to pack."

Kyle and Jack left Jimmy's office, naturally a bit bitter. They went to each of the Medusas, and received mixed reactions to the news. Max was the only one who seemed truly "happy" about it, the Steinels, Buchner, and Elena Kovac just seemed confused, having never been to Camp Hero at all. Frida Hofnitz, for her part, was actively angry, as was Harune, and Joshie was visibly just trying not to cry. But the order had come, and so it must be followed through.

Kyle, Max, and Harune packed the few belongings which were truly theirs, and left to say their goodbyes. Kyle had an especially long goodbye with Jason Roth, whom he'd spent precious little time with in recent years. Among other things, Kyle taught Jason the basics of picking up girls before he left, at Jason's request.

"Remember what I told you when you left Camp Hero?" Kyle asked him.

"You said not to lose the little spark I have," Jason said.

"That's right big man," Kyle said, "you still better not. I'll see you around."

Jason smiled, and Kyle drew him into a hug, which Jason reciprocated in that halfhearted teenage way, and Kyle left.

What was rather shocking was what happened when Kyle went to say goodbye to Yoshiro Tsurabaya.

Tsurabaya: "I'm coming. I quit."

Kyle: "You can't just do that. Can you?"

Tsurabaya: “Yes I fucking well can. I’m a private contractor as well. Didn’t you know that?”

Kyle realized that yes, he must’ve known it, if only intuitively. Tsurabaya worked for Project Phoenix as an affiliate private contractor for Arasaka Robotics, and could’ve easily left after the Camp Hero revolution in 1986. He’d stayed, Kyle supposed, to be with his friends.

Kyle: “But your armory? It’s your pride and joy!”

Tsurabaya: “It will survive. Now, I’m going to step inside, and I’m going to call my boss and tell him my new scenario, and then I’m going to pack.”

And that was that. Kyle walked away from it a good deal happier than he had been when he arrived, glad at least that he wouldn’t be leaving his best friend.

The Medusas had all agreed to meet on the beach where Prometheus was parked. Kyle left a couple of hours early, to have a chat with Prometheus about what was to come and the uncertainties of the future. After all, it was her future too. Franz was a bit perturbed that Buchner most likely would be forbidden from recruiting the new spotter for him, but such is life.

“Welcome aboard, Captain,” Prometheus said, as she always did.

“Hello, Prometheus. We have a lot to discuss,” Kyle said, and set towards what he called “the hub,” that is to say the circular room near the center of the ship where Prometheus’s “mind” was held, within its large red sphere.

“You don’t come down here often,” Prometheus observed.

“No, I suppose I don’t,” Kyle said, seating himself on the floor. “We have to leave, Prometheus.”

“Isn’t that why you usually come to me? Is something the matter?” Prometheus asked.

“I suppose not much. You’re going to a new home,” Kyle said, “and that unit I told you about; I believe you’d best get used to them.”

“May I scan them?” Prometheus asked, “In much the same way as I scanned and found you.”

“Be my guest,” Kyle said, and Prometheus went silent for several minutes.

“I don’t like her,” Prometheus said, cutting into whatever Kyle was musing on in the silence.

“Don’t like who?” Kyle asked, and was unsurprised when the image Prometheus projected into his head was that of Frida Hofnitz.

“She is vile,” Prometheus said.

“I know she is,” Kyle said. “It wasn’t my choice that she should be with us. I’ll watch her when she’s on board.”

Prometheus emitted a psionic pulse, which might have been called a “sigh,” and then asked Kyle to tell her of her new home, such as it was. And so Kyle did, telling her all about Camp Hero, at least all that he knew of it, aware that it had changed a good deal since he’d left. Kyle and Prometheus must have chatted for an hour before Kyle realized that he must leave and get the others and their luggage loaded onto the ship. And he did so, finding that a few of them were already arriving. He was almost surprised to find Tsurabaya was indeed among them.

Soon enough, everyone was loaded onto Prometheus. Kyle kept his promise, keeping a close eye on Frida Hofnitz throughout the flight, though there wasn’t exactly much she could do, given that it was a strange ship to her, and everyone stood on the bridge anyway. Perhaps 20 minutes later, David emerged the ship from subspace into orbit of Mars.

“Alright. To the Green Belt then? Anywhere more specific?” David asked.

"Not for the house. Just keep away from any other buildings," Kyle instructed.

"No civilization allowed, huh?" Hofnitz murmured.

"No, none," Jack said firmly. "We're not going to have our house discovered."

David lowered the ship into Mars's atmosphere once again, and aimed Prometheus in the direction of the Green Belt, near the Martian equator, quite obvious from orbit. Not long into their search, the group saw what looked to be a traditional Japanese village, which someone explained was a hot spring resort, which were apparently not unheard of in the Green Belt, as they passed over several others in the search for their homestead.

As it happened, this search was not to be completed in a day. After about seven hours, the complaints of the need for food became a bit too insufferable, and Kyle directed David to head for Neu Berlin. It was the only place he could think of to get food, not to mention the fact that they had no mattresses, as Prometheus's bunks were all still without them. They had just enough of Emmermann's money left over that Kyle was fairly sure they could afford these things, but hardly anything more. And so, when Prometheus docked at Neu Berlin Spaceport, Kyle stayed on board to make arrangements for further money, seating himself in the Captain's chair.

"Prometheus," Kyle began, "you do keep a log of all past transmissions, yes?"

"Yes, Captain." was Prometheus's reply.

"Perfect!" Kyle said. "I'm sure you've stored Emmermann's transmission from our last trip; patch me through to his frequency please."

"Right away," Prometheus said, and to Kyle's great amusement, began playing the sound of a ringing telephone as she put

him through to Emmermann, who actually picked up, much to Kyle's shock.

"Hello Kyle. How the fuck did you get this frequency?" Emmermann asked.

"My ship is smarter than you give her credit for," Kyle said, "and I have a request, to ensure the continuation of that which you've assigned us to do."

"Kyle, if you need a loan, just say it. Stop talking like you have a broom stuck in your ass," Emmermann said. "Go to a bank and set up an account. I'll wire what you need tomorrow. How's my Golden Boy?"

With a start, Kyle realized that Emmermann must mean Max. This was the first time he'd seemed to express concern for Max's wellbeing beyond the basic fact of Max's being medically alive. Kyle wasn't sure what to make of it.

"He's doing well, Sir. Should he not be?" was Kyle's measured response.

"He's been through a difficult time as of late, no? I was making sure he was still able to do his job," Emmermann said, and in an instant, Kyle had never hated Emmermann more.

"He's a German man. His ability to do his job was never in doubt. May I go now? I have a crew to attend," Kyle said, biting back all he truly wanted to say.

"Yes, go on. I'll wire the money," Emmermann said dismissively, and ended the transmission.

"Bastard," Prometheus said, cutting into Kyle's seething thoughts, so overwhelming that he couldn't see straight. But as always, the computer section of his brain overtook, and he calmed down.

"Yes," Kyle said at last, "but the show must go on."

Forcing himself to not react further, Kyle got to his feet and walked into other parts of Prometheus, to fiddle with this and

that until the others returned, starting out in the kitchen. He knew that all was working, of course. But the re-checking distracted him until the others returned, bearing both food (dehydrated or otherwise non perishable, in packages) and the promised mattresses, which Kyle had neglected on the last trip, with himself, Jack, and David instead sleeping in the very comfortable seats on the bridge. But now, of course, there weren't enough seats, thus necessitating the mattresses.

The mattresses were set up in the bunks, and because of colonial law, it was necessary that Prometheus be parked overnight outside the bounds of Neu Berlin territory unless the Medusas were willing to pay a toll of 3,000 Bundesmarks, which they couldn't afford. As it was by now the evening, David piloted Prometheus from the spaceport, parking her in the desert some distance from Neu Berlin. During the war, this would've been impossible, and the ship would've been bombed. Now, Kyle and the others could eat their dinner in peace, and retire to their bunks after using Prometheus's sonic showers, which they did in two groups, divided by sex.

After the men had taken their showers, and the women were stepping into theirs, Tsurabaya pulled Kyle aside into one of the rooms in Prometheus's upper level.

"I got us a present," Tsurabaya whispered, and flipped aside a blanket which covered something on a low table.

"A guitar. Holy shit!" Kyle exclaimed, seeing the closed guitar case.

"Yes indeed. We needed something for morale," Tsurabaya said, flipping open the case and lifting out the guitar, which was a beautiful specimen of fine dark wood.

After their showers, everyone went into Prometheus's lounge room, ate their dinner, sang a few songs, and went to their beds, their morale raised greatly. In the morning, Kyle returned to

Neu Berlin, to open the bank account which Emmermann had suggested.

"May I come?" Iridia asked, and Kyle saw no reason she couldn't. And so, after once again parking Prometheus at the Neu Berlin Spaceport, and taking one of the new trams from the port down into the city, the hunt for a bank began.

Kyle had the instinct that he'd best pick a small bank, in a part of town where he was not known. And so, he and Iridia plunged into the center of Neu Berlin, the part which is an almost entirely faithful reproduction of pre-war Berlin, save for the fact that instead of the Spree River, there was a sunken zoological garden which could be viewed from above on the various bridges which went over it, connecting the city to the reconstructed Museum Island. Many families were out and about picnicking and such, mostly working or middle class sorts, with no uniforms in sight except those of offices or factories. They'd found their district.

Kyle and Iridia ducked into a tiny bank on a street in a building right next to one of the bridges to the Museum Island. Kyle opened an account there, using some false name which he has long since forgotten. Given that he was uniformed, the bank wouldn't have dared ask him for identification. Even after the war, the military was not to be questioned. The process took no more than 10 minutes.

"Can we go walk around the zoo? Pretty please?" Iridia begged afterward, and Kyle laughed.

"I guess I don't see why not," Kyle said, "but no more than an hour."

And so for the next hour, Kyle and Iridia walked around, looking at the sunken channel which ran through the center of Neu Berlin, replacing the Spree River, though the amount of plants must have required nearly as much water. The animals

and plants on display were alien. Not from Earth, or Mars, or any planet which Kyle knew, though some did have a familiar archetype, such as a massive snake with eight heads, something which looked rather like an orange Pangolin with a crocodile snout, and a tiger striped pale blue and grey rather than orange and black.

Eventually, Kyle and Iridia returned to Prometheus, and David once again flew her in the direction of the Green Belt. It was decided they'd build the house, then return and pick up the money wired by Emmermann, to space out their appearances in Neu Berlin. The last thing they wanted was to be recognized.

As it transpired, the Medusas' strategy of trusting serendipity was the correct strategy, as their second visit to the Green Belt found them a spot to build their home within the first hour. They found a large valley with a lake, in totally unspoiled wilderness, with a beach on the edge of the lake which was far larger than they needed to land Prometheus.

"We've found our home," Hofnitz said, and Kyle realized it was the only time he'd ever seen her smile.

"Yes we have!" Kyle shouted boisterously, and an eruption of claps and cheers went up all round as David landed Prometheus on the beach.

"Wahoo! Let's check this place out!" Joshie shouted, and all the Medusas began crowding to unload from the ship.

Over the next few Halcyon days, the Medusas unloaded the panels for the house, and built their estate. They called it, "The Eagle's Claw," and claimed 42 acres of the untamed wilderness which their house sat in.

On one of these idyllic evenings, Kyle, Joshie, and Tsurabaya began talking, looking at the happiness of the Medusas, in particular Buchner, Kovac, and the Steinel brothers, none of whom had or would ever know the horrors that had been Project

Phoenix less than a decade previously. Due to limited memory and the constant switching of languages, I can't relay this conversation in detail. However, over the course of it, Kyle, Tsurabaya, and Joshie wrote the following song on the subject.

Someone told me long ago
There's a calm before the storm,
I know, it's been coming for some time.

When it's over, so they say,
It'll rain a sunny day,
I know, shining down like water.

I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain?
I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain
Coming down on a sunny day?

Yesterday, and days before,
Sun is cold and rain is hard,
I know, been that way for all my time.

'Til forever, on it goes
Through the circle, fast and slow,
I know, it can't stop, I wonder.

I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain?
I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain
Coming down on a sunny day? Yeah!

I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain?
I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain
Coming down on a sunny day?

One big advantage of the homestead was that the Medusas could hunt for their dinners, rather than relying on the packaged food they'd bought. They enjoyed massive and delicious fish (Martian Sturgeon) and various other wildlife. The air here was thick enough and the temperature high enough that no suits were needed. Of course, as always, it had to come to an end.

"Right then," Jack said, over one breakfast, "when and where are we going to build our bar?"

"We'd best head for the settled zones," someone said, possibly Hofnitz. "We can put an advertisement in the Marsianer Morgenrufer."

"First we need our money," Kyle said, and so a plan was decided. To begin it, Kyle called Emmermann once again the next day, once again at the frequency logged into her system.

"Hello again Kyle," Emmermann said upon Kyle's call. "Yes I've wired the money."

"Good," Kyle said, speaking as though Emmermann were his employee rather than the opposite.

"Yes, good," Emmermann said evenly. "To pick it up, take a shuttle, not your full ship, I don't want it becoming familiar. And for the bar supplies, head off Mars. In fact leave Sol altogether. Over and out."

Apparently Emmermann didn't see any need to converse with Kyle over something so trivial as his private army.

"Prometheus, are your shuttles even functioning?" Kyle asked, realizing his own stupidity in having never serviced them.

"Yes, Captain. You should have checked," Prometheus chided.

“I know, I know. Well, I suppose we’d best follow The Old Man’s orders,” Kyle said, standing to his feet. “I’ll go get us a pilot.”

Kyle left Prometheus again, rejoining the Medusas on the beach.

“Alright,” Kyle shouted, “I need a shuttle pilot. Who wants to do it?”

“I can do it Father,” Harune piped up, “I’ve not let myself get rusty.”

“I don’t see how you could have prevented it, but fuck it,” Kyle said. “Finish your breakfast and hop in.”

Harune scarfed down his fish, then got to his feet, accompanying Kyle to Prometheus, where they boarded one of her two long, boxy shuttles with rounded glass fronts. As it turned out, Harune was more than capable of flying Prometheus’s little shuttle, and his assessment of his skill wasn’t overblown. It was as if he’d never left David’s training. Kyle wondered if Harune would ever cease to amaze him.

After a short flight, Kyle and Harune arrived once again in Neu Berlin. Kyle instructed Harune to stay behind, thinking to himself that Harune might be made to show his identification, at which point his name would be recognized. Kyle went to the bank quietly, keeping his head down. He wore his uniform and his Cross of Thor, which made him unquestionable. Emmermann, it turned out, had been more generous than Kyle thought necessary, sending six million Bundesmarks. Surely bar supplies couldn’t be quite that expensive, he thought, not thinking of the other expenses they were about to incur.

The trip to Neu Berlin went off uneventfully, and Kyle and Harune returned to The Eagle’s Claw for further planning.

“We need weapons,” Buchner said. “We can’t keep going with bullets.”

It was true; the Medusas were indeed running low on bullets, and in the aftermath of the war's end and the rescinding of treaties, colonial gun stores had ended sales of them virtually overnight, except as collector's pieces. It was decided they'd shop for these things wherever they went for bar supplies. After much discussion, it was decided they'd head for a colony known as Neuhalle. Apparently things were a good deal cheaper there than Mars, and it had a reputation (according to Jack) as a more low brow place where identification wasn't asked for. When I've asked, Kyle has been fairly sure that this colony was located in the constellation Lacerta, when viewed from Earth, though as he wasn't the navigator he can't swear to it. In any event; the Medusas packed and took off. One of their house's features was a GPS in its home computer system, so that the location could easily be uploaded to Prometheus, for a simple and easy return.

Kyle and the others boarded Prometheus and headed off for Neuhalle. The flight through subspace was quite long, at least 18 hours. Someone had brought a deck of cards, and so everyone but David played cards on the flight, David of course being stuck in the navigation chair. I suppose now I can describe the proper house at The Eagles Claw in more detail.

The house, as has been described in the previous chapter, was a peculiar modular affair, two story and in the Japanese architectural style. The first floor was divided down the middle by a wall, with one side a small kitchen, with a few burners powered by the small plasma powered generator mounted under the house, which also powered the remaining electronics. The Medusas ate at a table which jutted from one wall, standing room only as they had been provided no chairs. One of the kitchen's cabinets was a small refrigerator, and while there was a replicator in the wall which dispensed enough water to cook and wash one's hands with, there was no replicator dispensing

food. On the other side of the downstairs was a single long couch, pointed to the single television screen inlaid into the wall, though with no antenna, there was not much chance of watching television. This screen also served as a computer, however, and so could access The MarsNet.

The upstairs of the house at The Eagles Claw was essentially a small barracks with 20 beds, five to a bunk. There were also four closets with toilets with a space to stand in while one had a sonic shower. It wasn't the Savoy, but it was quite comfortable for a few soldiers.

Eventually, David pulled into the orbit of the planet on which Neuhalle sat, and began lowering into the atmosphere, aiming for the only city visible on the surface, which he assumed must be Neuhalle. This proved correct, as soon enough, Prometheus received a transmission, in a robotic, obviously recorded voice.

"Welcome to Neuhalle. Halt immediately, open up your ship, and prepare to be boarded. Failure to comply will result in your being shot down without warning," the voice said.

"Welcome in-fucking-deed," Kovac muttered, and David halted Prometheus, and the Medusas began heading towards the loading bay, which David had opened up as instructed.

"Identifications ready people. And put your guns down," Kyle instructed, and everyone complied, moving to the loading bay.

Within a few moments, Prometheus was boarded, by about seven soldiers, dressed head to toe in black tactical gear, carrying large rifles. The soldiers arrived riding on the back of personal vehicles, which looked like motorcycle sized dragon-flies. These they flew into Prometheus's hold, and carried out a brief search, before giving landing instructions. As usual, there was a large, circular landing port, separated from the city itself and surrounded by a massive wall. Prometheus landed here, and the Medusas deboarded. This landing pad had a tram to convey

visitors into the city of Neuhalle, after a documents check and a stowing of weapons by the authorities.

The planet which Neuhalle was situated on, as the reader has no doubt come to expect by now, was Earth like with a twist. The air was quite breathable, and the plants were similar to the plants of Earth, however the planet had three suns, two white and one orange, the orange being by far the closest to the planet. The region of the planet was quite mountainous and jagged, so that the tramcar wound through and up and down the rocky terrain, the city of Neuhalle nearly invisible until the tram was right upon it.

Neuhalle, to Kyle's mind, looked rather like a much smaller version of New Munich, Harune's hometown, with its skyscrapers, drones, holographic displays in the sky, and so on, though unlike New Munich, Neuhalle had almost no visible Japanese influence, save a few Arasaka stores.

"Do they have girls here at least?" Tsurabaya asked Jack.

"Yes, I believe so," Jack said with a laugh.

"Good. We need interviews for the bar staff," Hofnitz cut in curtly.

"That's not what we meant, sweetie," Tsurabaya said condescendingly, which earned him a sharp slap upside the head by a random bystander, no doubt a woman.

"When are we actually getting off this ride anyway?" asked one of the Medusas, possibly Kovac.

"We'll get off when we get off," Kyle shot back. "I'd say about now."

The tram had snaked for quite a long distance then, through the affluent hill areas with their single family homes (in the old Sudeten German architectural style) into the "cyberpunk" central city, nestled in a large valley. It was here that Kyle decided the Medusas were to alight. It was by then night on the

planet which Neuhalle was situated on, at least as much night as it ever is, on a trinary sun planet.

"We'd better find a hotel," Jack said, and at one stop, the Medusas alighted, all carrying overnight roll up bags with single changes of clothes. They all stood on the platform, taking stock of their surroundings.

The street was fairly wide, and lined with tall trees. Restaurants, cafes, and stores of all types spilled onto the street. The presence of a number of money changers indicated they were in tourist town. Almost instantly, the group saw a hotel up the road a ways, which they as one headed for. The hotel belonged to the Avalon chain, which is widespread at the colonial level. The hotel lobby was quite large, with a tan floor of faux marble. Kyle was happy to see, among other things, a number of prostitutes standing around in the lobby, and not just for lecherous reasons.

"We're likely going to hole up here for a while," Kyle said decisively, "someone go check prices, I'm going to case the neighborhood."

"I'll come with you. I have the only gun," Buchner said. Kyle smiled at this, seeing that Buchner had apparently managed to bypass the search on Prometheus.

Harune also volunteered to come along, as did Joshie, and the remaining Medusas went to check in to the Avalon, one of them carrying a briefcase with Emmermann's money.

Kyle, Harune, Joshie, and Buchner left, heading out onto the street and leaving their bags behind. They somewhat stood out, as it turned out. Kyle and the others were wearing green belt appropriate clothes, that is to say jackets and long, heavy cargo pants, while the colonials of Neuhalle wore summer clothes, and did not have the obvious holsters which Kyle and the others still wore. The neighborhood proved to be as one would expect;

highly commercial and tourist oriented, with shops, travel agent offices, hotels, and poorly disguised brothels facing onto the street. It looked like fun, but not like what the Medusas ultimately needed.

"We need to find the backstreets," Buchner said, quite correctly. "This is too… respectable."

"Yes," Kyle said. "Let's do that in the morning. I'll ask where we can find such areas."

"From the whore you take to your room tonight?" Joshie whispered into Kyle's ear, and Kyle somehow suppressed a laugh, as of course Joshie had hit the nail right on the head.

Kyle, Buchner, Harune, and Joshie returned to the Avalon then, and after some searching, found the remaining Medusas waiting for them in the hotel bar. The rate, for all the seven rooms, was 600 Bundesmarks a night. Likely the cheapest Kyle had seen, and certainly for a hotel this nice. Most of the Medusas had their own rooms, save for Harune and Joshie, who shared a room, as did Buchner and Hofnitz, whom Jack had given the task of helping Buchner to lose her accent when she spoke German. Kyle pulled aside a few of the men, definitely Max and Franz included, and told them of the mission of recruiting the local working girls for The Glass Hub, and ultimately the Medusas.

Max: "How does one recruit a prostitute anyway?"

Franz: "How do you think, Dumbass?"

Kyle: "Precisely. If they're not satisfactory, don't recruit. We want them good, if they're to do the work we need."

And with that, Kyle dismissed them. He's not sure which men were included in that brief meeting, as it seemed innocuous enough in the moment. He did, however, feel a moment of self doubt at more or less ordering his son to sleep with prostitutes,

but he knew Max already partook in regular life, and in any case, it was the mission. The Glass Hub needed a staff.

The rooms contained, among other things, little catalogue books from which one could simply order from the hotel's roster of prostitutes. Kyle being Kyle, he partook on that very first night. He paid for two hours with a blonde Spanish young lady named Emilia. With the rates here, it was practically a pittance. Kyle greeted her already bare naked save for his Seiko wristwatch, and had a most satisfying interlude with Emilia. Kyle had just emptied himself the first time, and Emilia had stood, to pour a drink or some such. Kyle stretched out on top of the bed and began to recruit Emilia.

Kyle: "Emilia, Mi Amor; how would you like a trip to Mars?"

Emilia: "I wouldn't. My stepfather was killed there when I was a child. Why? Are you planning to take me?"

Kyle: "Yes I am. If you want to."

Emilia: "What are you, a mafioso or some shit?"

Kyle: "No. I'm offering you a chance at a free life. You'd come work for us, get fucked only by who you chose, and once you had enough money, you could go wherever you want."

Emilia turned then, and asked; "Why do I get the strange feeling you're telling the truth?"

In response, Kyle glanced down at his crotch, stared wide eyed for a moment, then looked back up at Emilia with a boyish look on his face. Emilia sprayed at least 70% of the drink in her mouth laughing. She then sat down on one of the little chairs beside the bed, and she and Kyle discussed the terms of Emilia's possibly coming to Mars.

Emilia wouldn't come unless two conditions were met; first, she must meet all the Medusas, and second, they must provide her with a passport, be it legitimate or not, she didn't care. Emilia wouldn't hear of any business of bribing spaceport

authorities to let her and whomever else they recruited through without documents. Kyle made the snap decision to agree.

"Alright," Kyle said, "but I need to run a few more tests."

With that, Kyle and Emilia did a number of the different sex acts which Kyle imagined might be requested by The Glass Hub's clientele, though of course this time it was entirely out of Kyle's own lecherous nature and a desire to "get what he paid for," as Emilia had already proven herself. When the two hours Kyle had paid for were complete, Emilia left, and Kyle tipped generously, as he always did with ladies of the night.

Kyle didn't need to tell Emilia that if this got out, she would be killed. That was implicit in all these sorts of arrangements. Nor did Kyle tell Emilia that she'd have to undergo training as a spy, and put said training to use. There was no point in telling her potentially unappealing information that might influence her to remain on Neuhalle. It was manipulative on Kyle's part, but that was the job.

As it turned out, Kyle and the other Medusa men, as well as a couple of the Medusa women, recruited about 10 of Neuhalle's working girls. Kyle specifically remembers, other than Emilia, a young half German, half Japanese girl who called herself Madeleine, which probably wasn't her real name. All the girls gave the Medusas fake names which were to go on their fake passports. Only a few problems remained, namely bar supplies, weapons, and of course the false passports. As it turned out, bar supplies were the easiest to tackle from the start, so I'll describe the process and why it carried complications thus.

In the colonies of Der Bund, alcohol and the implements of serving it are a complicated and uneven issue. Each colony is allowed to have their own laws, which lean towards very restrictive, thus requiring bars and restaurants on more restrictive planets to get their alcohol through a mafia of smugglers, who

acquire the alcohol through the more relaxed planets and then traffic it to their clients. Neuhalle is a very relaxed planet, whilst Mars is one of the more restrictive ones. Thus, the Medusas had to find the mafia.

To do this, Kyle, Harune, and Buchner went to a liquor store on one of the "backstreets" of Neuhalle, where the hybrids, chimeras, and those with cheap or botched cybernetic attachments congregated. It seemed every colony of any size had a district which was like this. Thus, it was not surprising when the proprietor of the district's largest liquor store was a man with green lizard eyes and rather scaly skin, which he tried very hard to cover, and he'd seemingly had most of the scales removed from his face, neck, and hands. However, the few exposed parts of his chest and arms were quite scaly. He looked up with some surprise at the sights of Kyle, Harune, and Buchner.

"You're awfully pretty for these parts," the proprietor said congenially.

"And you're not," Harune shot back with a smile, which earned him a laugh and an outstretched hand.

"We're opening a bar," Buchner said, "and we wonder if you'd like to make a bit of extra cash."

Instantly, the proprietor changed to another air altogether.

"Get the fuck out," the proprietor said. "You want that shit, go see the Serbs. I run a respectable business. Don't make me get my fucking shotgun."

Kyle, Harune, and Buchner left promptly, deciding they didn't want to unnecessarily get into a firefight.

"I know where to go," Harune said upon the trio exiting onto the street.

"What? How?" Buchner asked, as she still had no idea of the extent of Harune's psionic prowess.

“I tapped in,” Harune explained, “as soon as we walked in, I entered his mind. When he said ‘go see the Serbs’ he had a few images and names flash through. We’re looking for a bar called Der Schwarze Schwan, and a giant shaved head man called Milosevic. I hope that helps.”

“You can’t possibly have gotten all that,” Buchner said.

“Most people don’t think deliberately or in a protected way,” Harune said, “and if you doubt that, you’re probably one of the worst at it.”

“No one doubts your capabilities or your information,” Kyle said, with a sharp look of disapproval at Buchner, who still made no effort to hide the visible skepticism writ large on her beautiful face. “Right, then,” Kyle said briskly, “unless one of you two geniuses speaks Serbo-Croatian, I had best get Kovac.”

Neither of them did of course, and so Kyle, Harune, and Buchner boarded the Neuhalle tram and returned to the Avalon, where the others remained. Kyle assigned Tsurabaya, Buchner, and Iridia to go and start getting weapons, while he took Kovac to Der Schwarze Schwan and hopefully see the mythical Milosevic in hopes of getting their liquor. The remaining Medusas, Kyle more or less ordered to go out and play the tourist, for appearance’s sake and general morale, which was generally low.

“Now just where is this shithole we’re headed for?” Kovac asked once she and Kyle had exited onto the street outside the Avalon.

“I have no fucking idea,” Kyle confessed, “we’ll ask until we find out.”

“Really? Amazing, you seem to know everything else in existence,” Kovac said sarcastically.

“Odin give me strength,” Kyle muttered to himself, then added to Kovac; “No one knows everything. Not me, and not you either. Start flagging people down.”

Kyle and Kovac turned from each other then, and began discreetly asking those around on the street. They strategically asked only those who were visibly in a hurry and distracted, and thus unlikely to remember the interaction. It didn't take long for one of them to learn that Der Schwarze Schwan was another hotel of the same name, and thus Kyle and Kovac set out towards it on the tram.

Unlike the Avalon, Der Schwarze Schwan was a stately hotel, built to look like a small Bavarian castle surrounding a courtyard. In other words, exactly the place one might find a Serbian alcohol mobster. Kyle and Kovac entered, finding their way to the bar, which was a very grand Art Deco styled affair, with a mosaic of a black swan at the back wall behind the bar, giving the bar its name.

"Corelian Sour," Kyle told the bartender.

"Vodka Tonic," Kovac said, then added in a hushed voice; "and a man called Milosevic."

"The name is familiar," the bartender said, wrinkling his face in mock confusion, "but I have memory problems. I need therapy for it and it costs 700 Marks a session."

With a roll of his eyes, Kyle handed over the required amount.

"Oh, look at that, my memory is coming back," the bartender said. "You'll find your Milosevic in the Gauleiter Suite, on the fourth floor. He doesn't allow men without an appointment. Looks like you're going to stay with me, big fella."

"You're not my type, faggot," Kyle said sharply, seeing the bartender's meaning, "but I will stay here. Medea, you go on up if you think you can. If you need help-"

"I won't," Kovac said briskly, draining the last of her Vodka Tonic. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

“Drop Emmermann’s name,” Kyle whispered into Kovac’s ear as she walked away, and she nodded. Kyle stepped into a corner, away from the eyes of the bartender to wait for her.

Kyle’s suggestion, it turned out, worked very well indeed. Not 10 minutes later, Kovac returned, with Milosevic in tow. As Harune had remotely seen, Milosevic was indeed a very tall, muscular man, his head shaved, wearing a tailored burgundy suit and tasseled leather loafers. His shirt was halfway unbuttoned, showing that his chest was rather heavily tattooed. Milosevic snapped his fingers wordlessly as he walked past the bar with Kovac in tow, heading to a side booth, and Kyle hurriedly approached, sitting opposite Milosevic, quietly holding his pistol under the table, aimed at Milosevic’s balls. Milosevic never knew this; Kyle didn’t believe in warning a potential enemy.

As it turned out, this measure was unnecessary. Milosevic proved to be quite a gentleman, as alcohol mafia kingpins tend to go. He knew a good deal when he saw it, and a chance at Emmermann money was certainly a good deal. Milosevic only had one demand, aside from one million Bundesmarks a year, in exchange for the Medusas receiving all the best alcohol, delivered on Milosevic’s own ship. Milosevic wanted a house. A full house, on a tropical planet of his choosing. Not a big one, he assured them, but a house nonetheless.

“I don’t foresee this being a problem,” Kyle said, hoping he meant it. “Tell me your banking details. We’ll wire you your first payment in a week. Don’t write them, I’ve got a memory like an elephant.”

“What the fuck is an elephant?” Milosevic asked, visibly confused, before he began to dictate his banking details.

After this, Kyle and Kovac left, returning to the Avalon hotel. One of the girls they’d recruited from the prostitutes of the

Avalon, the aforementioned Madeleine, had proven to be a worthy hire, and had gotten herself and the other young ladies their illicit passports, so that it was now time at last to leave Neuhalle and return to what Kyle at last considered his true home; Mars. The working girls were given the run of The Eagle's Claw until the alcohol arrived, while the Medusas made a brief return to Camp Hero to check in on their house there and find Franz his promised spotter. But those are stories for a future chapter.

Author's note: I'm not sure what I may add to this piece of writing, as I hope all was adequately explained, and I'm sure the reader is intrigued to read this new phase of Kyle's life as a spymaster.

Chapter 3

"Welcome to Camp Hero, wherever that might be," David said upon exiting Prometheus from subspace, mere moments after leaving Mars behind the second time.

"It's not much of anywhere," someone commented.

Kyle looked out the front windows of Prometheus's bridge. While he'd of course only recently been back to Camp Hero for Andrew's funeral, this return still somehow felt like his first trip back since the revolution, perhaps because he was no longer seeing it through a daze of grief.

"Alrighty," Jack said, "David, you know the landing procedure here?"

"How the fuck would I know that?" David asked irritably.

"Sounds like he needs some pussy," Kovac, who happened to be standing next to Kyle, muttered.

"A simple 'no' would've sufficed," Kyle said, trying and failing not to laugh at Kovac's words. "You need to head for that big main landing pad to the left of the lighthouse. They'll tell us where to park from there."

"Your wish is my command," David said, still very irritable sounding, but he complied, aiming Prometheus towards the all too familiar landing pad on which Kyle had first arrived at Camp Hero, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Already, a small team was assembling on the landing pad to direct the new arrivals.

"Home shit home," Hofnitz said.

“I don’t know what you’re all being such Debbie Downers about. Shouldn’t we try and make the best of shit?” Max demanded, and Kyle, to his surprise, found himself agreeing.

The ship landed, and Prometheus opened up her loading bay door, as usual. The Medusas then all filed down onto the landing pad, and Prometheus instantly closed up. The Medusas had deliberately left all their weapons on Mars save for a few KA-Bars, as they didn’t want their arsenal being examined, then possibly confiscated, and then ending up in the Camp Hero machine.

“You’re the crew of the Prometheus?” asked one of the persons who had flagged them onto the landing pad, a young Slovakian gent, if Kyle’s guess at accent was correct.

“Yes. I’m Captain Dellschau. Do you need something from us?” Kyle asked, stepping forward, his hand outstretched.

“Not really,” the Slovak said, “just that you’ve been on the list for new arrivals. You may park on any beach, so long as it’s not the main one. And welcome to Camp Hero!”

“I certainly hoped I’d never hear those words again,” Kyle muttered dryly, then turned back to the Medusas.

“Alright people. Set out into the base. Heracles, guide them. Apollo and I are going to park the ship,” Kyle instructed, and they obeyed. They always obeyed Kyle’s commands, even as much as he disliked the role of a commanding officer. It wasn’t in his nature.

Most of the group set off, their packs slung over their shoulders. Kyle and David reentered Prometheus, and Kyle directed David on where to park. Kyle had him park on a distant beach, out of sight of prying eyes. He instinctively didn’t trust that Prometheus wouldn’t be examined or cannibalized if she was parked in an easily findable place. This done, Kyle and David deboarded.

David: “Alright. Where do we go from here?”

Kyle: “Well. Depending on how much of the old system Jimmy has kept in place, we go to face a bureaucratic fucking nightmare. I just don’t know to what degree.”

“I meant what physical location,” David said with a laugh.

“Oh. In that case we head for the old radar tower. It’s the only surefire entrance to the underground,” Kyle said sheepishly. David nodded, and the men set out.

The walk was rather long, several miles in fact as it turned out. Prometheus had been parked on a beach a good deal to the north and west of Montauk Point. There was very little here. Only one unpaved road led to this area, and the buildings above ground were being reclaimed by the elements. One large white metal building had been sealed, with a board bolted to the door. The board on the door had the words; “Off limits, pending historical review,” painted on it in several languages. Kyle recognized the building immediately, though he’d never seen it before. He knew, from descriptions at the various resistance meetings he’d attended, that it must be the old punishment building.

“I wouldn’t”- Kyle began, as David rushed up to look in one of the windows, but he was too late in his warning.

“Oh my God! Oh fuck!” David screamed at looking in on the window. He backed away in obvious shock and daze. Kyle walked up and grabbed David by the shoulders, looking him firmly in the eyes. After a moment, David took a deep breath, and he and Kyle moved on.

Kyle and David reached the proper, central complex of Camp Hero soon enough. At one point they passed some very odd abstract statues of bent metal rebar and barbed wire, which they couldn’t explain. Kyle looked in at the entrance to the underground which he’d usually used, and indeed, it had not been

repaired, or rather, it had been filled in with concrete. And so they continued on to the path to the old radar tower.

The tower looked much the same as Kyle had remembered it. Large, fairly foreboding, and heavily guarded. A bevy of Air Force personnel stood around the gate and the door, though these days they lacked the cattle prods and murderous dogs they'd had during the Reign of Terror. In addition to the guards, most of the Medusas had also gathered in front of the gate, with only Franz and Kovac missing.

"They ran off," Joshie explained. "They'll get picked up eventually and brought here. Let's get inside."

With that, the Medusas went past the gate to the entry to the tower. They were retinal scanned by the usual handheld, scanner gun-like device, then waved inside. The Medusas then went down the same steps which so many thousands of children had been herded down for so many years. Joshie had to quietly pause and take a deep breath before entering the room where new arrivals were hosed down, which hadn't changed a bit in the intervening years, and was clearly still being used for the same purposes, judging by the wet floor. Beyond it, Kyle was rather glad to see that, at last, the hallways of the underground were lit, and the drips had been stopped up, so that Camp Hero was a slightly less ominous and difficult to navigate place.

The housing officer's office was located in the same place it had always been, on the gallery of offices where the heads of the project always were located. What was different was, again, the lighting, and the names on the doors. Bielek, Chan, Dupree, et al were gone. The only old name which remained was Roth, much to Kyle's consternation. The name of the new housing officer has been forgotten, all that is remembered is that he was a rather hyper man, and sent the Medusas to their new housing;

not one, but two little houses in Montauk township. They were all given a key, and thus sent out.

Kovac and Franz met them in the hallway, being led along, handcuffed, by two Air Force officers with the signature black triangle badges which showed them as base police. It should be noted that these handcuffs were made of a diamond alloy, and the locks biometric, as standard handcuffs would break like twigs if placed on an enhanced person. Kyle knew one of the base police, a young German woman, whom he'd slept with on a number of occasions during his first stint at Camp Hero.

"Hello Magda," Kyle said, his eyebrows raised.

"Hello Kyle," Magda said, managing not to blush, "you know these two idiots?"

"Unfortunately," Kyle said, rolling his eyes. "You can let them go."

With a chuckle, Magda and the other base police officer did so, holding a thumb up to the tiny biometric lock on the handcuffs, which clicked open, freeing Franz and Kovac.

"Thanks for nothing," Franz said with a dirty look at Kyle.

"You're welcome. Don't wander off again," someone said.

Franz and Kovac received their keys, and the Medusas set off for their homes, which were, as it happened, 402 and 406 Abbeville Road, in Montauk township. Kyle noticed that all the men were given keys to 402, and all the women given keys to 406. Jimmy had been enforcing sex segregation in general lately, as part of his measures to ensure the relative safety of women and children, though he hadn't shown any interest in discouraging casual sex, likely knowing that this wouldn't go over well with the average soldier.

After exiting, Kyle and the others flagged one of the usual hovering trams, much like those which they were used to from Fort Worden, save for the fact that these were driven by humans,

rather than automated. The driver gave the Medusas some unfortunate news; without a particular permit, they were not allowed to ride the tram, and as they were present as private contractors rather than workers of Project Phoenix proper, they would have to jump through quite a few hoops to get it. Private contractors, once again due to Jimmy's reforms, were being separated from the population to stop abuses. A decent measure, but it hardly made Kyle and friends happy about having to walk several miles to their homes. But walk they did, "bitching and moaning" all the while, until they reached their two allocated houses.

The allocated houses, as they'd all rather expected, were quite small. Too small for them, really, particularly the men's house as there were so many men. Not that their beloved Eagle's Claw was any better. Both houses were small, white, single bedroom cottages of whitewashed clapboard, fairly typical of New England. The insides had very nice hardwood floors and tasteful furniture, with delicate cream colored walls, quaint but adequate kitchens, and surprisingly generous bathrooms. They'd have been perfect for no more than two people, but for all the Medusas, they were destined to feel like a sardine can.

"Home shit home," Hofnitz said once again, pessimistically.

The Medusas went their separate ways, the Medusa men entering 402 Abbeville Road, and the Medusa women the next house up, as had been expected. The house, as has already been described, was very nice on the inside, and though the space was tight, Project Phoenix had been gracious enough to provide a number of futon beds. The shower had been retrofitted with a hoop shower head from the ceiling, enabling multiple persons to shower at once. Kyle didn't much relish having to return to a life of always rubbing against a group of other men while showering, but such is the life of a soldier without rank. Things such

as soap, cleaning supplies, basic foodstuffs, insecticide, and the like were provided.

"Could be a lot worse," Tsurabaya said.

"It certainly could," Max agreed, determined to be optimistic, "let's set up."

Taped to the inside of the front door was a small packet of papers, containing information on the situation of the Medusa Unit. The unit, as it turned out, was at Camp Hero as "private contractors in reserve." This meant that while they had freedom to come and go as they pleased, they were forbidden from recruiting amongst Camp Hero's population, from mingling with anyone on base below the age of 15 without express permission, from keeping weapons in their homes, and from using most services, such as public transportation or free food delivery. All their food was to be entirely self-provided. In addition, as they were "in reserve," the Medusas could be called on missions on behalf of Project Phoenix at any time. Kyle and most of the others found this relatively agreeable, but some found it an outrage. The restriction on recruitment meant that Franz's spotter would have to be supplied from elsewhere.

For perhaps five days, the Medusas settled into their home. Tsurabaya took to giving walking tours of the base to the unit members without any knowledge of Camp Hero, and Kyle allowed himself to relax. Joshie, at last, began telling more of his life story, or what he could remember of it. He had the vaguest sense that he had been a 27-year-old Irishman who had been killed, then resurrected at Cheyenne Mountain as a child and sent to Camp Hero when he was perhaps five years old. His memories were obviously very vague, and his descriptions even more so, but Harune was affected enough by it to write the following song.

He was born in the summer of his 27th year,
Coming home to a place he'd never been before.12345
He left yesterday behind him,
You might say he was born again,
You might say he found the key for every door.

When he first came to the mountains,
His life was far away,
On the road and hanging by a song.
But the string's already broken,
And he doesn't really care,
It keeps changing fast, and it don't last for long.

But the Colorado Rocky Mountain High,
I've seen it raining fire in the sky.
The shadow from the starlight is softer than a lullaby.
Rocky Mountain High,
Rocky Mountain High.

He climbed cathedral mountains,
He saw silver clouds below,
He saw everything as far as you can see.
And they say that he got crazy once and he tried to touch the sun,
And he lost a friend,
But kept the memories.

Now he walks in quiet solitude,
The forests and the streams,
Seeking grace in every step he takes.
And his sight has turned inside himself to try and understand
The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake.

And the Colorado Rocky Mountain High,
I've seen it raining fire in the sky.
You can talk to God and listen to the casual reply.
Rocky Mountain High,
Rocky Mountain High.

Now his life is full of wonder,
But his heart still knows some fear
Of a simple thing he cannot comprehend.
Why they try to tear the mountains down to bring in a couple more,
More people,
More scars upon the land.

And the Colorado Rocky Mountain High,
I've seen it raining fire in the sky.
I know he'd be a poorer man
If he never saw an eagle fly.
Rocky Mountain High.

With the Colorado Rocky Mountain High,
I've seen it raining fire in the sky.
With friends around the campfire
And everybody's high.
Rocky Mountain High,
Rocky Mountain High,
Rocky Mountain High,
Rocky Mountain High.

After about five days, the anticipated call came in from The Glass Hub; the alcohol had arrived, and it was time to open for

business. It was Kyle's recruit, Emilia, who made the call as it happened, though to David's glass pad. Of the three glass pad men who had "sampled" her (Kyle, David, and Max), David was her favorite, which he never tired of reminding the others.

"All right, ladies and gents," Kyle said, turning to the group, who'd all crowded around David's glass pad to hear Emilia's message; "pack up, we head back in the morning. We've got spies to train and a bar to open."

"Thank fuck," Iridia said.

"Will they have spotters there?" Franz asked, sounding like an annoying child.

"We'll get you your goddamn spotter. How many times do I have to say it?" Kyle demanded irritably.

David: "You know little brother, you're 23 years old, and it's no longer cute to be so petulant."

Franz: "You want to talk about fucking petulant? How about the time-"

Eventually, morning arrived, and the Medusas, with their roll-up bags, walked the long distance to Prometheus. To their surprise, several guards had been posted at the edge of the beach, looking over Prometheus, though when asked, they said they'd been unable to approach more than 100 yards, and also been unable to leave the beach. Once again, Prometheus didn't want strangers near her, and had more or less imprisoned these guards, aware that they'd seek more powerful psionics, who might overpower her will. It didn't altogether bode well for her future at Camp Hero.

"Welcome aboard Captain. Back so soon?" was Prometheus's greeting, cordial as ever.

"Yes. And yet it's been too long. We need to talk later," Kyle said decisively.

Kyle and the others crowded onto Prometheus's bridge, as usual. David sat in the pilot's seat and flew to Mars, as usual, emerging Prometheus above The Glass Hub. The working girls whom they'd hired were standing excitedly beside it, along with pallet after pallet of crates, containing, one would assume, the delivered alcohol.

"We can store that all in a nearby cave or something," someone said, "that greasy Serb has outdone himself."

"He certainly has," Kyle said. "Apollo, land the ship. You all get to sorting and setting up. I need to talk with Prometheus."

"Are you two fucking or something?" Max asked, totally straight-faced. Kyle managed to wait until all the others had left before completely guffawing.

"You wanted to talk, Captain?" Prometheus asked, once Kyle had calmed down.

"Yes," Kyle said, sobering up. "I'm worried about your safety. And our safety by extension."

Prometheus: "The incident on the beach today?"

Kyle: "Yes. They want to inspect you. Reverse engineer you."

Prometheus: "Well Captain. Have I not kept them away so far?"

Kyle: "Those were not trained psionics. Warriors of the mind. Prometheus, I know you pretty well, and you have your limits."

Prometheus: "What do you suggest?"

"I have no fucking clue!" Kyle bellowed, then felt instant guilt.

"I..... have no fucking clue," Kyle repeated, quietly and sheepishly this time.

"You're feeling quite serious about this, aren't you Captain?" Prometheus asked, sounding unusually compassionate.

"Yes I am, damn it," Kyle said. "And the fact that you're not is... alarming."

“I’ll think, Captain. And I’ll remain calm while I do it,” Prometheus said, reentering her vaguely condescending tone, “and you should do the same. For now, don’t you have work to do?”

“Yeah yeah,” Kyle said, chuckling, “we’ll talk more about this later.”

Kyle left Prometheus then, finding that the Medusas were in the process of opening the crates, and Harune was using his skills to “jump” the contents as needed into The Glass Hub itself, to the shock and trauma of many of those present. Eventually, with the bar properly stocked, a few went out in search of a cave system in which to store the remaining stock, which they found very easily, and Harune once again “jumped” the alcohol into the cave.

“Are you a lizzy?” One of the ladies of The Glass Hub asked.

With all set up, Jack and Buchner left for Neu Berlin to place an advertisement, and Kyle gathered the recruits from Neuhalle, and finally told them the news; that they were to expect military personnel, and that their jobs would mean not only “servicing” these men, but gaining their trust and getting information. Information of interest to the security of Der Bund.

“Trust me,” Kyle said, “no one is easier to get info from than a drunk and satisfied man.”

“Like we don’t already know that,” Camille, one of The Glass Hub’s ladies, said.

“Of course you do,” Hofnitz said, “but this time, you’ll be safe. And we’re also beginning an armament program. Those of you who want to learn to defend yourselves can ask Ms. Buchner or Kyle here.”

“Thank you,” Kyle said, having had no intention of telling about the so-called “armament program” yet.

Eventually, Jack and Buchner returned, bearing a copy of the ad they'd put in the Marsianer Morgenrufer, in a number of languages. It read as follows.

"Come to The Glass Hub!
Beautiful girls!
Live music!
Military discounts!
Premium cocktails at reasonable prices!
Nostalgic interior!
Fun for the whole garrison!"

There was more of course, but that was the gist of it. They'd also placed advertisements for more ladies of the night, and had brought a few from Neu Berlin. They were slated to open in two Martian weeks. In those intervening weeks, The Glass Hub's women underwent training. Among the many weapons gathered on Neuhalle were a box of tiny diamond-bladed stiletto knives, which the ladies were to have visibly strapped to their legs. Buchner ensured that all the ladies knew how to use them, both as a threat and in practice. Harune likewise administered some light psionic training, teaching the ladies some basic telepathy, and how to concentrate their thoughts while engaging in it, so that their transmissions would be clear rather than "noise." Over the Martian fortnight between the placement of advertisements and opening night, many more ladies of the night arrived, so that there must have been over 40 on opening night.

Opening night came, and a number of small private ships and military shuttle craft of various nationalities came with it. Close to two hundred people crowded the door of The Glass Hub, mostly wealthy men and women and a fair amount of soldiers, when at last the door to the airlock allowing entry was opened

up. Everyone was searched at the door and had their weapons checked by Buchner at the door, then they were turned loose to explore the bar. After a few minutes, Jack went to the microphone on the second story and spoke, addressing the crowd.

"Hello, hello everyone. Welcome to our humble little watering hole," Jack said, and was greeted by thundering applause.

"Thank you, thank you," Jack said, "this place holds a lot of good memories for some of us here. Now I thought, to open up the night, I'd share a song I wrote with… a really good friend of mine. Kyle!"

"Present!" Kyle shouted back. This was the moment he and Jack had rehearsed, out of earshot even of the other Medusas.

"Yeah I bet you're present," Jack continued, "get your sorry Teutonic ass up here, now!"

Kyle obeyed, joining Jack on the stage on The Glass Hub's second floor, where waited the guitar which they'd bought in Neu Berlin, to raise morale. Kyle played the guitar while Jack sang the following song.

Your color's fading,
'Cause I kept you waiting.
It's a wild, wild world,
And you're a wild, wild girl.
Our sun's still shining,
But it seems half the size,
And it's a wild, wild world
Out here,
Before my time runs out.

What if I run away to Mars?
Would you find me in the stars?

Would you miss me in the end
If I run out of oxygen
When I run away to Mars?

I can't tell which way is home,
I've been gone for so long.
It's an empty world up here.
I skip stones and wonder,
How long till I'm discovered?
It's a quiet life up here,
Before my time runs out.

What if I run away to Mars?
Would you find me in the stars?
Would you miss me in the end
If I run out of oxygen
When I run away to Mars?

Three, two, one.
I miss you.
I'm sorry I got issues.

What if I run away to Mars?
Would you find me in the stars?
Would you miss me in the end
If I run out of oxygen
When I run away to Mars?

The song was a hit. Shouts for encores erupted, but Kyle and Jack shook their heads, even as bills began to rain down on the little stage.

“Enjoy your night!” Kyle shouted into the microphone and alighted from the stage, eventually finding Max.

“Hi Dad,” Max said, visibly unsure how to read Kyle’s smile.

“Hey Kid,” Kyle said. “I’ve got a present for you. Tonight.”

“What do you mean Dad?” Max asked.

“Well. You’re a man now, have fun tonight. Do whatever you want. Drink whatever, have whatever girls you want, and bring me your tab. I’ll pay and I won’t ask questions,” Kyle said.

“You mean it Dad?” Max asked.

“Better accept before I change my mind,” Kyle laughed, and of course Max instantly accepted.

Kyle had been looking for a way to truly treat both his sons since Andrew had died. While he’d now had this obvious opportunity to treat Max, who was a boisterous soldier like Kyle himself, he wasn’t sure how to treat Harune, but he was determined to figure it out, after tonight. For now, he not only was going to enjoy the night for himself, but much more importantly, to observe. Who were the night’s most high-profile guests, who were the highest-ranked military persons in attendance, who tipped the most generously, who came with private security, and so on and so forth. Anyone outside the norm had to be noted by a Medusa.

Kyle was both shocked and utterly unimpressed when he saw that the most high-profile guest was Emmermann, though he was invisible to the other guests, unaware of even his identity, much less the sway he had on their lives every day. Kyle decided not to speak to Emmermann. If Emmermann needed Kyle, he’d find him.

The next most notable guest was Vincente Coronado, son of Salvador Coronado, both of whom had of course been frequent guests at the original Glass Hub. Unlike Emmermann, Vincente was quite well recognized. In the intervening years, he also

hadn't lost his proclivity for being orally "serviced" right in the open. The Glass Hub's old rules of "anything goes, if and until the lady agrees," had been kept in place, and so such public services were quite available.

Other than Emmermann and Vincente, there were no other guests whom Kyle recognized outright, by face or by name, for all of the first three days which The Glass Hub was open, (the bar would be open only on weekends, initially) however he and the others did still note the biggest spenders and the most decorated military men and women. Most of the men who came had two drinks and 20 minutes with one girl, then mingled in the crowd, maybe requesting a song on the music system, which Joshie was overseeing from the little computer terminal designated for the purpose. Most of the military women who came simply danced and drank, and sometimes hooked up with a man. These were what was affordable to the average soldier, even with The Glass Hub's military discounts.

This class divide, of course, was very deliberate. Ordinary soldiers would always be welcome at The Glass Hub, but as a spy hub, the target audience was the wealthy and the highly ranked. A few of these were quite well noted, including several generals, most notably a red-haired American giant known as Kowalski, and a very highly decorated Taiwanese general, by the name of Wang Yu Nong, both of which are names worth remembering. These were both noted by the Medusas, (as were several other of the wealthy who'd shown up) and Iridia approached them both, offering them memberships at The Glass Hub, which would make it almost certain that they'd return. They were then "marked," to be pumped for information by the spy ladies of The Glass Hub.

All in all, the opening three days of the revitalized Glass Hub were a rousing success, more than the Medusas could have

reasonably hoped for. They'd made enough money to maintain Prometheus and pay their rent at Camp Hero for at least six months, and at last they were finally clicking together as a team. It was, overall, a good start for the unit, and prepared them for the inevitable call from Emmermann, to begin putting them to use as his private army. Said inevitable call came the very day after The Glass Hub closed until the next three-day event.

The call came, it turned out, directly to Max's glass pad. Max, Kyle, and several of the others were sitting around inside the bar, lazily cleaning up after the previous three days, when Max's glass pad blared. With a groan, Max answered it.

"Opa! This is a surprise," Max said, at which point Kyle began paying attention, and went up to where Max sat.

"Not from my end," Emmermann quipped, "nor should it be for you. The one way to get through life is if you never allow there to be any surprises."

"Spoken like a true puppetmaster," Kyle thought to himself as he crowded up next to Max.

"Do you need something, Sir?" Kyle asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I need to talk to Max," Emmermann said. "Max, please go somewhere private."

"Yes, Opa," Max replied, standing up with a shrug and moving to one of the little cubicles which The Glass Hub had, for privacy with one's chosen lady of the night.

"Alright," said one of the girls of The Glass Hub, a young woman called Irmengard, approaching Kyle; "it's time to discuss our payment."

"You can keep 20% of whatever your clients give you," Kyle said dismissively, straining to hear what Max and Emmermann said. But Irmengard wasn't taking it lying down.

“No, no,” Irmengard was saying, “30% and not any less. But the ladies and I have been talking. We’re demanding a salary. A set salary.”

“Well fucking excuse me. I didn’t realize we’d hired a bunch of Jews,” Kyle spat. “Alright. In a while, you may talk with both myself and Flynn. Together.”

Irmengard’s eyes narrowed, but she said no more, allowing Kyle to (in vain, as it turned out) attempt to listen in on whatever Max and Emmermann were saying. Eventually, Max reemerged, with a grin on his face that could only be described as smug.

“Well Dad,” Max said, “looks like you’re following my orders now.”

“What?” Kyle asked with a smile.

“The Old Man is having me running point on this next mission,” Max explained, sounding a touch nervous. “I have to get five of our people. Who would you recommend?”

“Who would you recommend, Mi Pequeño?” Kyle asked pointedly. “If you’re going to run a mission, you’ll have to pick your own crew.”

“Alright. I’ll… do that. You’re my first pick Dad,” Max said, no doubt trying to sound confident.

“Thank you,” Kyle said, “now go find the others. I’ll be waiting. And send Jack in here, I have to work something out with him.”

“You certainly do!” shouted one of The Glass Hub’s ladies.

“Give me strength,” Kyle muttered to himself, and stood to move to the bar, as he did so calling; “Alright ladies, let’s have it out!”

It should be noted that, at this point, The Glass Hub had about 30 ladies of the night in its employ. More had joined over the course of the three-day opening event, only to promptly

leave again as soon as it was over, their tips in hand, likely hoping to be free, and Kyle and Jack hadn't tried to stop them.

The 30 remaining ladies sat Kyle and Jack down to discuss two things. The first, of course, was their permanent salary, as mentioned earlier. The second was the fact that Kyle and Jack, as soldiers, had not the slightest clue how to run a business, especially one which they couldn't have afforded to patronize had it not been under their ownership.

I struggle to remember how exactly the conversation which followed went down, and so I'll not bore the reader with an attempt at it. However, I can tell of how it all concluded; Jack and Kyle realized and conceded that they needed someone to run the bar and keep the ladies happy, while they and the remaining Medusas continued out their real work. In so many words; they needed a Madam. It was in this conversation that The Glass Hub's role as a military front operation was revealed.

A few names were passed around, however Jack would only hear of one; Camille Lambert, one of the ladies of the night who'd come to The Glass Hub after Neuhalle. She was a tall and very beautiful French brunette, and not only did Jack know her personally beforehand, but she had actual experience in running these sorts of businesses, and had done several years of service in Nacht Waffen in military intelligence. She would, it was decided, run The Glass Hub as a business and be left in charge of vetting girls who'd come to work there, on the lookout for good potential spies and soldiers.

With such an important position, Kyle and Jack decided to give her an actual position in The Medusa Unit, and a callsign; Aphrodite, whom it is often forgotten was not only a match-maker, but also the patron goddess of prostitutes and female spies.

This all done, Kyle felt totally relieved, both of the horrors and uncertainties of business, and of feeling prevented in any way from being a part of Max's first mission as head. Now, let's turn our attention there.

Author's note. And so it has completed, the story of the very beginnings of The Medusa Unit and their use of The Glass Hub as a base of operations. I feel the need to make note of a certain lack of detail in this segment. I make such note not out of apologia, but rather to make the point that I myself struggle to remember much detail from this phase, and to assure that it's about to change.

Chapter 4

"Alright," Max said immediately, upon Kyle's exiting the business meeting within The Glass Hub, "are you ready?"

From the fact that he'd been standing right by the door, as well as his general tone and excited stance, one could deduce that Max had been waiting by the door for the entire time.

"You're not excited or anything," Kyle snickered. "Who else is coming?"

"Well. I think the most complete team is us two, Franz, Buchner, Harune, and then Cheng," Max explained. "It'll add up to seven with David flying us, two over the limit, but fuck it. Do you agree with my list Dad?"

"Whether I agree with it means fuck all. It's whether you agree with it," Kyle said firmly, smiling.

Max: "Well. Alright, then yes. I agree with my team."

In truth, had he been inclined, Kyle could have poked a few holes in Max's team. While the inclusions of Buchner and especially Harune were unquestionable, Kyle wasn't certain Cheng would have much to contribute, and Kyle would have brought Hofnitz instead, as she'd have served a role. But it was Max's team, and Max must learn these lessons on his own.

Kyle: "Good. I don't suppose The Old Man gave you any information as to what the operation is?"

Max: "What do you think?"

Kyle laughed knowingly, and he and Max set off to gather the remainder of the little crew for Max's mission. As per usual, they were going to leave the next day, to one of Emmermann's

estates. What wasn't usual was the location; the city of Neu Nuremberg, on Saturn's moon Titan.

"I didn't take this Emmermann for… what's the American phrase? A city slicker," Franz said sarcastically, "but maybe he can get me a spotter."

"You're all on your best behavior," Max said, continuing the explanation he was giving the little group. "I'm not saying don't swear or grab ass, but when you do, try to do it in a soldierly manner."

"So in other words, be normal?" Iridia asked with a roll of her eyes.

"More or less," Max said.

"Whatever," Harune said, "but I'm not fucking calling you sir!"

"Oh yes you fucking are!" Max shouted, rising from where he sat, and the brothers began moving towards each other, their fists clenched.

"For the love of Freyja," Kyle muttered, walking away. "These two never stop."

Kyle and the others packed, much as they usually did. What was slightly unusual was that they were not picked up by one of Emmermann's shipping container-esque shuttle craft. Rather, they were being expected to fly to Neu Nuremberg themselves, in Prometheus. Apparently this colony was the Steinels' home, and neither of them seemed to much relish their return home.

Kyle and the other Medusas eventually returned to The Eagle's Claw, and after dinner, Kyle decided to wander. He'd begun to feel disconnected from Mars, the planet which he so loved, and felt a need to indulge in nature for the night. He made his excuses after dinner, picked up his AKM (altered to fire plasma shells) and set off into the glorious forest. If he got lost, he could transmit his location to Prometheus, and David could

pick him up, or he could chart a way back on his wrist-mounted computer. The Medusas had, in their setting up phase, acquired such computers at some point, but I cannot in all honesty recall when, hence why I hadn't mentioned it until now.

Kyle walked for hours, as it turned out, following for a while a swarm of Mars's famous sparrow-sized fireflies, heading deeper and deeper into the forest. Kyle was largely unfamiliar with The Green Belt, and so on his wandering, he felt he'd uncovered a whole new layer of this planet which he calls "the beautiful red onion."

Kyle observed in his walk several new lizard species, smaller than the Martian average, as well as a species of tiny dinosaurs, which resembled more than anything a small Procompsognathus, though of course Kyle knew no such name, and merely saw them as cute dinosaurs. They were also very social, and approached Kyle curiously, even eating out of his hand when he offered them a few insects.

Kyle also found a new (to him) species of flower. These flowers most resembled a large orange or white hibiscus, save for one remarkable thing; the stamens glowed a deep neon orange, attracting nocturnal insects to them. Kyle stood marveling at one particularly large specimen, and saw that once an insect landed on one of these flowers and had gone deep enough into it, the flower would rapidly close, trapping the insect inside. These flowers were carnivorous.

The most notable moment came a few hours into Kyle's wandering, when he'd entered a bog-like area. In the distance a ways, Kyle saw a lit up spot, unclear in the trees. He supposed at first it must be a swarm of fireflies which had landed, though as he approached, he saw that the light was orange, rather than the typical blue of the fireflies, and the lights didn't flicker. Kyle

approached with growing curiosity, finding something very remarkable indeed.

"Oh my Gods," Kyle marveled. "A fairy ring! Or close to it."

Kyle had indeed found a slightly sunken, almost perfectly circular clearing, ringed and filled with the carnivorous glowing stamen flowers. Kyle estimated that the "fairy ring" was about 25 feet in diameter. At one side was a tall, slightly pointed, obelisk-like rock, which added to the eerie sacred feeling of the space.

Kyle was so affected by the spot that he decided to make a temple on it. Nothing too ostentatious; it would've been disrespectful to the nature. Kyle simply gathered a few logs, branches and rocks from around the forest, and so set up a small altar at the base of the obelisk-like rock. From the five foot high roof of the little altar, Kyle hung a log. First, he shot a hole in each end, then using his combat knife, he delicately carved the runic names of the top Norse gods. He hung the log through the holes, using an extra pair of bootlaces, which he always carried in his kit, and there he meditated for a good while, before a glance at the sky and the relative positions of Phobos and Deimos revealed that morning was coming.

While meditating, Kyle had what he would always hope was a real vision or visitation, in which Odin himself descended on the site, except for the fact that instead of an eyepatch, he had a robotic eye when he appeared to Kyle. Real or not, it was perhaps the most loving and divine experience Kyle ever had.

With the threat of sunrise, Kyle at last left his little haven, having his wrist computer pull up its mapping system and mark his position, pinning it in the system as "Elysium." He made it back to The Eagle's Claw at more or less first light, and was stealing back into the house just when the others were beginning to rise. They expressed a bit of surprise that Kyle was

already up and about, but they likely imagined he'd been off with some girl, and so it wasn't questioned.

"Right then," Max said over breakfast, "everyone on my team assemble at Prometheus in 30 minutes. Geared up, hair brushed, showered, the works."

"Yes Sir," Kyle said, genuinely meaning it. He was proud of Max, taking charge when it was his time to take charge. How far he'd come, Kyle thought, from the lonely little boy on the Camp Hero landing pad.

Max's team was ready as he'd requested, and assembled at Prometheus as he'd requested, on time. Kyle still had to ask Prometheus to open. She still answered only to him. And so the little crew of Max, Kyle, Harune, Franz, Buchner, David, and Cheng assembled, and David flew Prometheus to Titan.

"Get ready for the longest landing procedure of your life," David warned, upon emerging Prometheus into the orbit of Titan, which looked like nothing from the surface save for a massive ball of pale orange gas, until David swung Prometheus in orbit to a point where one could see the lights of a truly monstrous city, at the center of which was a space elevator, ascending to lower orbit.

"Big place," someone observed.

"Right," David said, "first I have to head for the outer station. If it's still there."

"Why wouldn't it still be there?" someone asked.

"I haven't been home since 1952," David explained.

"No doubt it's gotten worse," Franz muttered.

David turned Prometheus then so that none could see Titan any longer, and instead they were on the approach to a space station, which was a most remarkable construct. The station, rather than being a purely artificial structure of some sort, wasconstructed of dozens of asteroids, connected and held

together by a series of massive metal tubes, forming a structure that was only vaguely cohesive. The structure was surrounded by a blue spherical force field, which emanated from two disks at each pole of the sphere, with a thin metal ring around the sphere's equator. It was the sort of thing which could never have been designed and built by a human mind.

"Alright," David explained, "we have to land there. Get ready for scrutinization."

David aimed Prometheus at the force field, slowly lowering her through it and towards the odd station. Almost immediately, Prometheus's com link was activated, and a voice came over it.

"Hello, Prometheus. Our system says we've been expecting you. Aim for the big blue dome," the voice, a very robotic male voice said in a Franconian German dialect.

"Don't get your hopes up from that," Franz said, "we'll be waiting for hours."

"It's still better than Zagreb," Buchner pointed out dryly, to laughter all around.

David flew Prometheus around the massive asteroid-based construct a ways, until there was indeed a "big blue dome" visible, jutting out from one of the asteroids. One might have said it was "awkwardly jutting," but on this station, everything was "awkwardly jutting," and anyway, after rounding the station a ways, most of the Medusas eyes were taken by an all new site. This site, of course, was the planet Saturn, up close and in all its magnificent glory. Kyle found himself standing at Prometheus's window, simply staring out at it. The streaks, the rings, the general ethereal beauty. Kyle was grateful that somehow, the force field surrounding this station was invisible from the inside.

"She is beautiful," Harune said appreciatively.

“Yeah. Don’t get your hopes up though, this is as close as they’ll let us get,” Franz said, having also come to stand at the window, “the planet itself is excluded.”

Kyle was awash in disappointment for a moment, as in his usual way, he’d felt a desire to approach and explore the planet. But again as always, his professionalism prevailed in a few seconds, and he turned his attention back to the path towards the massive blue dome.

The dome, which covered most of one side of the asteroid, had a single opening on one side, which David piloted Prometheus into, revealing that it was a landing zone for ships, and a good deal bigger on the inside than the outside. Yet again, “basement universe” technology at work. The landing pad was huge and white, and of the type I’ve already described many times, so I’ll not go into much detail, save to say that Kyle noticed rather a lot more security personnel on site than the usual landing pad. But more as usual, David landed, and Kyle gave Prometheus the order to open and allow herself to be inspected. As always, she grumbled, but followed Kyle’s command.

As David had predicted, the inspections wound up taking hours. First, Prometheus was boarded, and the Medusas made to stand on the bridge, their weapons surrendered, for over an hour as the ship and their documents were inspected with a fine-tooth comb. Most of the ship anyway. The inspectors never entered the room in which Prometheus’s mind was held, so it was never inspected. Kyle later learned that Prometheus had pulled one of her usual psionic tricks so that the inspectors quite literally couldn’t see the door to the room, nor the missing space, as they took measurements so that every inch of the ship was accounted for. Afterwards, all the documents were inspected, and finally, the seven were led off the ship.

If Max, Kyle, Harune, David, Franz, Cheng and Buchner expected this to be the end of their inspection, they were disappointed. After alighting and being led a short ways along the landing pad, a new set of guards approached them, and began separating them, leading them away one by one to who knew where. At least Kyle didn't, until he was himself led away.

Kyle was led, with a guard on each arm, to an elevator, a third guard accompanying, carrying a massive cattle prod. The one object which Kyle slightly feared. Thus, he cooperated as he was led to an elevator, which descended quite a long distance downward, to what must have been over halfway into the depth of the asteroid. The elevator at last emerged into a long, dark, narrow, concrete hallway of rooms with steel doors. Into one of these rooms, Kyle was ushered. The room was small, with a single blinding light in the ceiling, and a metal table with a chair on each side.

Kyle sat on one side of the table instinctively, and a few minutes later, he was joined by a guard and interrogated. They started off congenial enough, but after a while of course, things shifted. The light levels began changing at irregular intervals, and the guards, who rotated, began asking Kyle the same questions over and over again. His name, his race, where he'd come from, his political affiliations, his real intentions on Titan, and those accompanying him. Kyle took it in stride. While the interrogation was obviously hostile, Kyle could also sense it was very routine, and that every new arrival on Titan was given this treatment. While he didn't enjoy it, he did find himself appreciating Titan's sense of security for the people.

Eventually, the interrogation ended, and Kyle was led out, and down the concrete hallway to an all white waiting room with folding chairs that Kyle dared not sit in for fear of breaking them. Several of the others in the group of seven had already

been delivered to this area, including Cheng, who was walking up and down the room ranting about the treatment of the assets. Kyle didn't much pay attention, as he saw that the waiting room had a long, wide window, through which he could observe Saturn. He stood at the window doing just that, until the remaining crew members were returned, Max being the last one.

"Now we have to wait, they tell me," Max groaned. "These fucking people."

"Why'd they keep you so long?" Buchner asked.

"Because I'm the ringleader, in their words," Max said bitterly.

"Shake it off kid," Kyle said. "You can't deal with this, how are you going to deal when you're tortured by the Syndicate?"

"That's an entirely fucking different context," Max said pedantically. "Gods, the Old Man better have some whores when we land."

"Really, Brother Bear," Harune chided, "there are ladies present."

With a groan, Max threw himself onto one of the plastic chairs, which of course broke into at least five pieces. The chairs were not built to withstand a forceful slam from a normal person, much less an enhanced soldier man of Max's size.

"Nice job Kid!" David exclaimed. Max just glared as he got back to his feet.

"Complaints aside," Cheng said after a few minutes, "this does raise the question of our treatment going forward. How do we expect to do a job in this environment?"

"We'll do a job in any environment, we're the fucking Medusas," Kyle said, "and anyway, we'll be let go soon enough. Won't we?"

Kyle spoke motivationally, but the question was genuine. While he could tell that the interrogations were routine, he in truth had no idea whether the crew had passed. Kyle wasn't the least concerned with whether they could escape; not even 30 of these guards could outmatch a single enhanced soldier, much less seven. However, Kyle was quite concerned as to if the group could make it onto the surface of Titan and the colony they sought afterwards. Being shot down was too high a risk, should they have to fight their way out of this facility.

"I expect so," Harune cut in, "their thoughts on turning me loose in here were of how much they hate immigration paperwork and having to file it for seven people."

"Sounds like them," Franz said. "I was born here and they still act like I'm a common leech trying to invade. But they will let us in. I hope you all name-dropped this Emmermann fellow? I did."

A bit more grumbling from everyone, and soon enough, things returned to normalcy, with everyone either sitting (more delicately than Max had) or standing at the window. At one point, Kyle glanced over the room and saw Harune reading a book. A book he couldn't have concealed on his person, and which couldn't have come from the waiting room, as the waiting room had no reading material on offer. Harune must have quietly "jumped" the book from Prometheus, or even from The Eagle's Claw. Kyle shook his head in an unknown emotion, but said nothing, just wondering when Harune would ever cease to shock and amaze.

The crew of Max, Kyle, Harune, Buchner, David, Franz, and Cheng must have waited for at least two hours before the door of the waiting room budged again. When it did, it was Emmermann who came in, accompanied by Georg Nimmer, Kyle's oldest and dearest friend, and another man. A short, dark haired, peculiar little man, who rather slunk shyly behind Emmermann

and Georg. While this man was a stranger to Kyle, he certainly wasn't to the Steinels. David's eyes widened and he gave a low whistle, and Franz, if only for a split second, visibly had to stop himself from recoiling in fear.

"Max," Emmermann began on entering the room, "this here is my old friend Klaus Barbie. I'd like you to meet him. Klaus, this is my grandson, Maximilian Bronsley. He's running this operation."

Max stepped forward to shake Herr Barbie's hand, and Herr Barbie gingerly reached out and shook it back.

"Why are there two Chinks?" Herr Barbie asked, his nose wrinkled.

"I'm a Jap. She's the only Chink. If you're going to insult us, do it properly," Harune said with a sarcastic smile, stepping forward and extending his hand. Herr Barbie didn't accept it of course.

"Allow me to introduce my team," Max said, and began doing just that. Harune and Cheng were refused handshakes, but it went over relatively smoothly.

"Now Sir," Max said at last, "what is all this about? Can we leave this place?"

"Yes, certainly," Emmermann said understandingly, and began leading the crew out of the room, and back along the concrete hallway to the elevator. This they all entered, and it began ascending.

The hallway was narrow, so only two people could stand side by side. Kyle stood next to Georg, to catch up with his oldest friend. It turned out Georg had a woman. A real, long term woman, by the name of Margarethe, from Neu Leipzig, wherever that might be, which Georg didn't bother to know, as it was quite a backwater apparently.

“Don’t worry,” Georg said, “we’ll still go pick up ladies. She doesn’t need to know.”

Franz took this opportunity to make his presence and his needs known to Emmermann, much to Kyle’s irritation. Franz went to the front of the group and spoke to Emmermann.

Franz: “Herr Emmermann, Sir?”

Emmermann: “Yes? You’re one of the Steinels, correct? Kyle insisted on your inclusion, against my objections. I hope you’re not disappointing.”

Franz: “No Sir, I’m not. But as for why I’m approaching you; I need a spotter.”

Emmermann: “That sounds like business. We discuss business later.”

Max reached forward in the line to give Franz a sharp swat upside the head.

The group reached the elevator up, which they ascended quite a distance, though not to the landing pad. Rather, they emerged into what looked like a large airport as might be found on Earth, save that instead of the doors in the terminal leading to airplanes, they were rectangular stargates. Along one side were a number of the usual duty-free shops and travel agents, and all along the rest were the gates. Emmermann began leading the group to a block of about 10 gates which was labeled “Domestic” by a large black and yellow cardboard sign. Each gate also had a sign above its frame, indicating the destination. Those in the “Domestic” block all led to moons of Saturn. Titan, Rhea, Enceladus, Dione, and so on. It was the Titan gate which the group approached.

“I’m not sure why we have to use the same gate as these stinking masses,” Herr Barbie said on the approach. “We could’ve just taken my ship, instead of this fucking-“

“These stinking masses should see their leader every now and again, and you should see them. It’s good to remember where you came from- and where you might end up again,” Emmermann said, placing a hand on Herr Barbie’s shoulder. While the tone and gesture were friendly, the “vibe” was decidedly not.

The desk for departures and arrivals was staffed by a young woman, who didn’t immediately look up as the group approached the desk.

“Hello. I need to see all your-“ the woman began, then looked up and gasped at the sight of Herr Barbie.

“They’re with me, hurry up and let us through.” Herr Barbie said, in a tone that indicated he would become violent were his wishes not met, which he no doubt would.

With a nod and very strained smile, the woman clicked a few keys on the keyboard of her monitor, and the metal gate before the stargate to Titan swung open, allowing the group of Emmermann, Herr Barbie, Max, Kyle, Harune, Buchner, David, Franz, and Cheng to have access. This they walked through, emerging into a large, circular, marble floored room, the walls of which were once again lined with gates, though these had street names, and weren’t guarded.

“You should really treat people better. That girl might have had a machine gun, and then where would you be?” Cheng asked, addressing Herr Barbie. She no doubt sensed that in Emmermann’s presence, he was powerless.

“I would be in a regeneration tank, and she would be on her way to being tortured to death,” Herr Barbie said. “I can’t say I’m surprised at your inability to understand power, Miss Chong.”

“It’s Cheng. Not “Miss” anything. You may address me as Alectrona,” Cheng said evenly.

“Yes. Use their callsigns. Now, I’d like to take my assets on a tour. We’ll meet you at your home soon enough, Klaus,” Emmermann said, “I trust their weapons will be returned when we arrive?”

Herr Barbie merely glared, then turned to slink through one of the gates. Emmermann turned back to the group.

“Right then. A tour of Neu Nuremberg?” The Old Man said cheerfully. There were shrugs and halfhearted nods all around. It was difficult to feel excitement after what they’d seen so far. But of course none of them argued as Emmermann led them to one of the gates.

In spite of the lack of enthusiasm which the assets initially felt, this was just as quickly overturned. The gate deposited them on a street in what seemed to be the center of the city. Before describing the area which the assets saw, I’ll first describe a general layout of Neu Nuremberg.

Neu Nuremberg is a city laid out within seven concentric rings. From one end to the other, in a straight line, from one edge of the outermost ring to the other, it covers about 140 miles. At the time of Kyle’s visit, the city had about 40 million inhabitants. Currently, it has about 65 million. Each ring is surrounded by an uberconcrete wall, a mile thick each, and covered by an essentially impenetrable force field shield, so that the innermost ring is covered by seven such fields. I’ll now give a brief description of each ring.

-Ring One: The outermost ring, which serves as Neu Nuremberg’s first line of defense in the event of an attack. Within this ring are numerous embattlements and military bases, containing Der Bund’s most formidable colony defenses, as well as being home to several million highly enhanced and highly trained soldiers, about 40% of whom are owned by Kruger Mercenaries.

-Ring Two: The second ring, this ring serves essentially as a massive shopping district, selling all that a resident of Neu Nuremberg might need, regardless of their social strata, with the shops becoming lower and lower in quality, and the districts in safety, the further south one goes, with some of the southernmost neighborhoods being little more than cartel strongholds for the sale of drugs, cheap sex, and slave labor.

-Rings Three and Four: These rings serve as living quarters for the slave population of Neu Nuremberg. These rings are made up of a seemingly endless sea of shantytowns or, in some cases, cave towns carved from the mesas indigenous to Titan. These rings are essentially no-go zones for residents of all other rings, save for some soldiers who patrol them to keep the populations in line. It's notable that the slaves are mostly of French and Slavic descent.

-Ring Five: This ring serves as the residential ring for Neu Nuremberg's strong middle class, who serve as the office workers, doctors, nurses, housekeepers, etcetera for Neu Nuremberg's elite. This district is characterized by both being fairly quiet, and by its beautiful architecture, with its various districts being made to look like small German towns.

-Ring Six: This ring is known colloquially by Neu Nuremberg residents as "garden city," and the name is fitting. The ring is stuffed to the gills with numerous parks and botanical gardens, some of which are under glass domes. This ring serves for the beautification and morale of Neu Nuremberg, and as such, it is uninhabited by all but animals, and the number of visitors per day is limited to a few tens of thousands.

-Ring Seven: The innermost ring, which is actually a complete circle. The outer part is home to the mansions and castles of Neu Nuremberg's elite, past which is a rather cyberpunk (in Earth terms) business district, also home to many

museums and historic sites, as well as fancy restaurants. In the very center of this ring is Neu Nuremberg's famous space elevator tower, where some of the highest elite of the city have their homes and offices.

It was Ring Seven which Kyle and the others were deposited in. Now, let us return to their experience of it.

The street which Kyle and the others were deposited on was almost dead center in the middle of Ring Seven. About a quarter of a mile straight up the road was the foot of Neu Nuremberg's space elevator tower, which rose miles high through six of Neu Nuremberg's seven force field shields, (all invisible from the inside) and all along the road were of course numerous buildings of any number of sizes and heights, most of them clearly having been built in the Art Deco period. A most intriguing feature were a number of buildings with large trees growing straight from the sides of the buildings, seemingly defying gravity.

Cheng: "Mein Gott. I've never seen so much… so much…"

Max: "Engineering?"

Cheng: "Yes."

For several hours, the group of Emmermann, Georg, Max, Kyle, Harune, Buchner, David, Franz, and Cheng walked through this central district of Neu Nuremberg, which was populated mostly by various shops, restaurants, museums, and historic sites. The group stepped into several of the various galleries, viewing the art of Titan from all eras. At one point Kyle noted that the buildings nearly all had foundations of deep red rock. Someone asked about this, and it was explained that the foundations were all from the original district, which had been built approximately 700 Terran years prior.

Kyle had never seen so many white Germans in a single place. While this pleased him, he did notice that Harune and Cheng

got rather a lot of stares, and thus stood together, largely separate from the group, for most of the walking tour.

Eventually, of course, the pleasant tour had to come to an end. Throughout, Emmermann was looking at his wristwatch at almost nerve-wracking intervals. At last, as the group was making their way down one cobbled street, which was lined by a number of very old stone and stucco buildings, Emmermann stopped the group.

"My underlings," Emmermann said regretfully, "I'm afraid we need to head to Klaus's home for dinner. The conversation will be shit, but the food will be good."

Once again, a series of sighs and shrugs all around, and the group left the little history museum they'd stepped into. This museum had been dedicated not so much to the history of Neu Nuremberg as to the fellation of Klaus Barbie, and so no one much minded leaving.

Emmermann led the group from the museum, and a few streets away towards the space elevator tower. Apparently this was Herr Barbie's home. Emmermann led the group of himself, Georg, Max, Kyle, Harune, Buchner, David, Franz, and Cheng through the glass front door, into the massive circular bottom level of the tower. The floor was all white marble, and this bottom level seemed to mostly be a bank of elevators, all of them guarded. A glance up revealed a lightwell going straight through the center of the space elevator tower, clear through to the top, presumably, though this was difficult for the eye to see.

Emmermann led the group toward a rather isolated elevator, the door of which was embossed with a single large rune, unlike the others which was plain. The guard at this elevator waved Emmermann and company through, and so they boarded. The elevator was quite large, with a long white couch running along

either side. The back wall was a single plate glass window, to afford one a view as one ascended to the heavens.

"Get comfortable, it's a long trip," Georg warned, seemingly more to himself than the others.

Emmermann punched some combination into the little keypad which was mounted on one side of the elevator. This done, the doors closed, and the elevator began its ascent to the skies of Titan. Kyle went and stood at the window to watch the city pass by as they ascended. At first it was difficult to see any of the city beyond that which they had already seen, due to the height of the skyscrapers in Neu Nuremberg's CBD. Once they'd risen above this, of course, they could see virtually everything. The castles and chateaus which rimmed Ring Seven, the monstrous and diverse gardens of Ring Six, the strands of little German towns making up the middle class Ring Five, the slums of Ring Three and Ring Four, the endless bazaar that is Ring Two, and the modular and concrete fortifications of Ring One. One could always tell when the elevator had passed a force field, as they became visible from the top side. In the far northeast, one could make out the sight of a massive black pyramid, beyond the borders of Neu Nuremberg.

A number of the team members sat on the couches on either side of the elevator, including Franz Steinel, whom Emmermann, in his most casually intimidating fashion, plopped down beside and began conversing with.

Emmermann: "So. You're one of the young men forced on me."

Franz: "Yes Sir, I am."

"Be careful," Kyle said to Franz telepathically, but he didn't intervene.

Emmermann: "You must be the sniper. You need a spotter?"

Franz: "Yes Sir, I do."

Emmermann: “Why don’t you have one already?”

Franz: “He died.”

Emmermann: “I see. Andrew was your spotter, was he? Well, in that case, I’ll make the call. Your spotter will arrive tomorrow, first thing. Next time, show some discretion before asking for things. Your behavior is hardly acceptable.”

Kyle glanced back at this, and couldn’t suppress a grin as Franz turned positively crimson and Emmermann stood briskly from the couch. Eventually, David came to stand at Kyle’s side at the window.

“Gods, I fucking hate this place,” David muttered, shaking his head.

“What’s so wrong with it anyway?” Cheng asked. “I like it.”

“You see that shithole down there? The fifth ring?” David asked, pointing.

“Yes,” Cheng said, “don’t all cities have slums?”

“That’s where I grew up,” David explained, as though not hearing her question. “My mother was a French slave. I won’t tell you how I made my money. But the point is, that’s the real Neu Nuremberg. What you see and like is just what that area maintains.”

“How did you get out?” someone asked.

“Turns out I’m really good at flying shit and Franz is really good at shooting shit,” David said, shrugging. “I need a drink.”

The elevator arrived, after what must have been a 10 minute ride, rising through six of the seven force field shields, and quite a distance beyond. The surface of Titan seemed to be all yellow sand and deep red rock, with some white ice covered mountains in the distance.

The elevator opened into a rather grand entryway, as one might expect. It looked more like something from a fairytale castle than a futuristic high rise tower, made all the more

anachronistic by the view from the diamond paned windows. The floor was of grey stone and mostly covered in ornate Persian rugs, the walls of the classic brown and white wood, festooned with tapestries. The futuristic city seen outside the widows was the only reason one wasn't surprised when Herr Barbie appeared in modern clothing rather than a costume of King Ludwig.

"Welcome, welcome," Herr Barbie said, having "perked up" once in his home. "Come to the bar."

The bar within Herr Barbie's monstrous home was about as one might expect; a stone mead hall, with a curvaceous serving wench in full costume. Kyle refrained from making any advancements, he had the feeling that it wouldn't be much appreciated in this household. No one asked yet what this was all about; once again, they were under the sense that things moved slower here than when under Emmermann's sole jurisdiction. The subject of any mission wasn't mentioned during the large dinner, though a bit of foreshadowing came just before the food was served.

Kyle was standing to one side of the room, opposite the long buffet table, where a veritable feast was being set up. About 20 guests had already arrived, none of whom Kyle knew, and none had seemed to feel the need to introduce themselves, nor had Kyle to them. At one point, a petite brunette woman entered, dressed very finely in a green evening gown, and fairly rushed into the arms of Herr Barbie, which opened as soon as he spotted her.

"So sorry I'm late," was all Kyle could overhear her say.

"Well well," Buchner, who stood at Kyle's elbow, said, "so the man does have a fondness for something besides his own penis."

"Who is she I wonder?" Kyle asked, more to himself than anyone.

“That’s his daughter. Ute Schmidt,” another guest, standing nearby, said. “Biggest madam on Titan.”

The dinner was pleasant as could be expected, with excellent food and extremely boring conversation, so that Kyle applied his usual filters, tuning it all out and trusting his senses to alert him if anything he’d consider relevant came up. Either his senses were failures, or indeed nothing he’d consider relevant came up over the course of the meat and mead centered feast. One slightly notable thing was that Emmermann saw that Max was treated as something of a guest of honor. He was indeed Emmermann’s “Ark of the Covenant” as he called him.

Of course, dinner eventually ended, and Emmermann regrouped his people. They’d no doubt been expecting a briefing, but they didn’t get one.

“We’re going to the house,” Georg explained.

“The house?” Harune asked.

“Yes. One of the castles on the edge of the city is mine,” Emmermann said briskly, “shall we go?”

“Opa, what the fuck is going on?”

Far be it from Max to have patience or a filter.

“An always prescient question, offshoot of mine,” The Old Man laughed, which was of course no answer at all.

Emmermann, Georg, Max, Kyle, Harune, David, Franz, Buchner, and Cheng once again boarded the elevator down from the Klaus Barbie home, back to Neu Nuremberg’s street level. The sun hadn’t shifted in the slightest, hours later. Not surprising, as a Titanian day is the equivalent of 29.4 Earth days, though Kyle had no knowledge of this, so at the time he assumed Titan must be tidally locked.

Emmermann’s group reached street level, and so exited the space elevator tower. They exited not through the grand entry which they’d used earlier. Rather, they exited through a small

side door, into an alleyway of sorts, between futuristic buildings. In this was parked a rather curious vehicle; it looked like a large green luxury bus, straight from a 1930s European tour company, save for the fact that it hovered, rather than driving on wheels, and was driven by a metal humanoid droid, as opposed to a human driver. Kyle had seen and would see such things numerous other times, but for some undefinable reason, this bus of anachronisms continues to stand out in his memory.

Kyle and company loaded onto the odd bus, finding that it had very comfortable red plush seats. The first bit of comfort that the group had experienced on Titan. They were thus driven from the dead center of Ring Seven to the outer edges, with its chateaus, castles, and manor houses. Emmermann's home was a castle, in the Bavarian style. Smaller than his usual, it was all red, built from Titan's indigenous red rock, and had two pointed towers.

Kyle and company alighted, and approached the red castle. The wide wooden doors swung open automatically as the group approached, leading to one of Emmermann's usual entryways; checkered marble floors, the walls decorated with various taxidermied animals from various planets. As usual, Kyle found it in somewhat poor taste, though he was very intrigued by one specimen; a small black dragon, about as long as Kyle was tall, with leathery wings about half that size. Kyle felt an urge to reach up and touch it, and was still somehow surprised when the feeling of the skin revealed that it was indeed a real specimen.

"Are there any women around?" Max asked, once everyone had gotten a look around the entryway.

"You really are my grandson!" Emmermann laughed. "Of course, there always are. I'll show you all to your rooms first. Then take your pick."

"May I see your armory?" Buchner asked.

“When the time is appropriate,” Emmermann said dismissively. Apparently she wasn’t in need of consideration, likely due to her accent and the fact that Emmermann didn’t know her.

Emmermann, with the assistance of a maid, showed Kyle and the others to their rooms. It seemed that Emmermann’s Titan castle was essentially a shrunken recreation of his Valhalla estate, which was described in much detail in chapter 14 of the second volume, so I’ll avoid repeating myself. Suffice to say, it was more than comfortable, and everyone had their own room, labeled as such by small plaques. All of the group’s luggage had been delivered from the arrival station. As usual in Emmermann’s house, Kyle had a very pleasant night, availing himself of one of Emmermann’s maids, made even better by the fact that she was a statuesque blonde. The night certainly lifted his mood, and he hoped that whatever woman Max chose would do the same. He was growing tired of Max’s general foul mood, especially since he’d be directing the coming operation.

In the morning, breakfast was had in a little dining room, all of the walls of which were covered in tapestries, so that one could see a panoramic embroidered view of 19th century Dresden from the top of the spire of the Frauenkirche. Breakfast was served, and almost as soon as it was finished, a maid entered the breakfast room.

“Herr Barbie is here, with his daughter” the maid said, after the usual morning pleasantries.

“Five minutes early. Fucking Germans,” Emmermann sighed, looking at his wristwatch. “Come with me Max.”

“Not the rest of us?” Harune asked.

“No, you’ll be called when it’s your time. Go amuse yourselves,” Emmermann said, already leaving the room with Max.

“Well. There’s us in our place,” Georg said, “Harune, would you come look at something with me?”

“Yes, Uncle Georg,” Harune said, and thus Georg and Harune also left the room. Kyle smiled to himself at this sight. Georg really did love his “nephew.”

“That leaves us lucky few,” someone murmured, and at last, the group dispersed into Emmermann’s Titan home. What he did for the next several hours, Kyle hasn’t bothered to retain. Eventually, a telepathic “call” went to the group from Emmermann, to come to his study, which they did, knocking when they’d assembled.

“Come in,” Emmermann called out, and so someone opened the door, entering Emmermann’s study, which was as stately as always.

Herr Barbie and offspring had left, leaving only Emmermann and Max standing in the study, in the middle of which stood a small holographic table, which Emmermann beckoned the others to, whilst switching the table on, so that a holographic planet map switched on, the topography of which no one seemed to recognize, nor did they recognize the few named settlements.

“Well Max,” Emmermann said, “this is your operation. Brief your team.”

“Thank you Opa,” Max said, and the briefing began.

As per usual, I won’t describe the briefing itself in detail. However, not as usual, I do feel the need to describe the incident which served as the impetus for the mission which followed.

Max and his crew were being sent, as it turned out, to a Spanish speaking colony known as Esmeralda, so named for the planet’s remarkably rich emerald deposits, which had made the planet very wealthy, but apparently not very intelligent, as evidenced by what occurred.

Perhaps a year before the mission occurred, a resident of Esmeralda had been walking on a beach, when he'd seen what appeared to be an abandoned briefcase. The man had opened the briefcase, possibly looking for an insignia of some sort, at which point he'd made two rather interesting discoveries; the first was that the briefcase was filled with little gears, cogs, and levers, and the second was that it was telepathic. The mysterious briefcase had asked the man for a piece of metal, and so the man had offered it a can from the beach, and the briefcase, via its gears, had assimilated the can in an instant, and compelled the man to take the briefcase into Esmeralda. The briefcase's telepathy was such that the man had been powerless but to obey it.

This powerlessness, it turned out, had spelled the demise of Esmeralda. The man who had found the briefcase had, under the sway of the briefcase itself, set up a stand for it in the center of Esmeralda, attracting visitors to the briefcase, which would then offer its services as an oracle to those who came to it, in exchange for a piece of metal to assimilate into itself.

As was bound to happen in circumstances such as this, a religion had sprung up around this briefcase oracle; La Iglesia del Dios Maquina. This had been reported and noted by colonial authorities, and tolerated for unknown reasons, perhaps seeing its potential as a tourist draw, or perhaps having themselves fallen under the influence of the mysterious entity.

Whatever the case may have been, as one would expect, the bizarre briefcase oracle had grown in size more and more with each piece of metal which the devotees had added to it. What had proven shocking was that the oracle (or machine god, as its followers called it) was forming itself into a coherent shape; that of a human woman, which had grown to the size of a four-story building. At this point, the entity had turned hostile, and

had begun moving, or rather, it had begun a march of terror across Esmeralda, assimilating anything made of metal. This monstrosity, ultimately, was what Max and company were being sent to deal with, in two days.

"I'd prefer to leave now," Max said, at the end of the briefing, "I don't want this thing to get any bigger."

"Good choice," Emmermann said with a smile, "I was hoping you'd say so. You're dismissed to pack your things. Young Steinel, if you survive this mission, you'll have a spotter waiting when you get back."

"Am I going?" Georg asked.

"No. I definitely can't spare you," Emmermann said. With that, Max, Kyle, Harune, David, Franz, Buchner, and Cheng left the study, withdrawing to the castle's bar in order to strategize.

"Max," Buchner said, deciding to be the first to speak, "I need weapons. Good weapons, not the shit we usually use."

"Alright," Max said, "I'll ask for an armory key."

"What is your grandfather anyway? He has money I can tell, but who is he to give us these orders? And what's it to do with the Barbie family?" Franz demanded.

"It's simple. Ute's marketing director is in Esmeralda. Or he was, assuming he's not dead," Max explained. "That's why they want us and not the proper military."

"Fucking nepotism," Harune muttered.

"Look, gents, I don't like this either," Max said, "that's why I want us to leave and get back home as soon as possible."

"Then let's," someone said decisively.

Plans of attack were finalized as much as they could be, and Max and Buchner set off to Emmermann's office to find a key to the armory. The others went up to their rooms to pack their few belongings. Kyle threw everything back into his duffel bag, as usual, then went to the entryway of the castle. For some odd

reason, this mission made him restless somehow. He was the first in the entryway, and having no better ideas, began using his wrist computer to scan the various stuffed creatures on display, as none of them had plaques to actually explain what they were. It wasn't long before Harune joined Kyle in the entryway.

"What's going on Father? We're not being told everything. I can feel it," Harune said.

"So can I, Kid. So can I. What was your uncle showing you earlier? I think we'll be here a few more hours," Kyle said, determined to distract himself.

"I'll go get it," Harune said with a shrug, dropping his bag and running off into the castle.

Harune returned mere moments later, bearing what appeared to be a very old book with a dyed red calfskin cover. This he showed to Kyle, proving it to be a Japanese narrative text, written from the perspective of a traveling salesman. The narrative was the story of the Princess Kaguya, however what was most surprising was that it told the story of her life after her return to the moon, and ultimately to Rigel. The traveling salesman, in the narrative, saves the princess from an attack on Mars, and becomes one of her personal guards, saving her on various adventures on the return journey to Rigel. As far as anyone could tell, it was the only text of its kind.

"Fascinating," Kyle said, "where does it come from?"

"We have no idea," Harune said. "Someone found it in a bookstore in town here."

"It's fascinating," Kyle said, "but it seems to be just something someone wrote. A personal follow-up. Or does The Old Man think it's more significant?"

“Well, the fact that it was officially published makes him a bit curious,” Harune explained, “he has this notion that it’s a real account. Gods, where the fuck is everyone?”

“They’ll be down in time, I suppose,” Kyle said, in equal impatience.

Eventually, a few did reappear, and finally Max and Buchner also reappeared.

“Right,” Buchner said, “we have to head to Ring One. Only place we can get what we really need.”

“Yes,” Max said, “Opa has given us all passes on our wrist comps. Anyone want to come?”

“Hmm. The sweaty military base or the castle? Tough choice,” Harune said sarcastically.

“I’m coming,” Kyle said. “I need to know what instruments of destruction are being brought aboard Prometheus.”

No one else seemed to have much interest in going, and so Kyle, Max, and Buchner set off for Ring One. Outside they found a hovering car waiting for them, which they climbed into, with Max choosing to drive.

“Pull your passes up, people,” Max instructed, “they shoot if you don’t have them ready.”

“Do you even know where you’re going?” Kyle asked doubtfully.

“I’ll figure it out,” Max said defensively. “You should stop being so tight.”

“I hope you don’t say that to girls,” Kyle said.

“Now boys, I believe we have work to do, don’t we?” Buchner irritably cut in.

Max started the car, and set off towards no one knew where, least of all Max. They drove for several blocks, but eventually they did find a gate to a subterranean car passage, heavily guarded of course, but the trio’s passes were sufficient. They had

to ultimately pass through seven gates, much like Inanna on her journey through the underworld, a point of interest which Buchner commented on at one point. The drive, as one would expect, was very long, perhaps 3.5 hours. Most of the Rings had exits from the tunnel. Rings Three and Four however did not. To stop escapes, Kyle realized with a slight shiver. Kyle, Max, and Buchner weren't, as a rule, very inclined toward conversation, and so the trip passed largely in silence.

The trip drew to a close, or at least reached a new stage, when the group reached a gate exit above ground, into Gate Seven.

"You look lost," the soldier at the gate said as he began checking everyone's wrist computer passes.

"Yes, quite," Max said. "We're looking for Fort Von Griem?"

"Follow the inner wall about 25 miles left, Fort is gonna be on your right. You can't miss it, it's red," the soldier explained cordially.

Max set of in this direction. As had seemed to be the case from the space elevator's view, Ring One was made entirely of fortresses and embattlements, mostly modular and many covered with force fields, their names posted outside crudely. Fort Von Griem, as the soldier had predicted, was indeed red, being made of dozens and dozens of modules all painted a bright crimson, surrounded by a force field fence rather than a dome. Max pulled up at the front gate, instructing Kyle and Buchner to access their passes.

"Weapons pickup eh? You must have some serious juice," remarked the gate guard, "head for the big square building in the middle. Your pass says you can take what you want, but you have to register with the Sergeant at Arms. His office is near the building. As you were."

"As you were, motherfucker," Max shot back good naturedly. One had to hand it to Max; he made friends wherever he went.

Max pulled the car through the gate, and towards Fort Von Griem's armory, a large square building, bright red and modular like all of the others. Kyle, Max, and Buchner alighted, approaching and entering the building, having to have their passes scanned yet again before being allowed inside.

The inside of the armory building was many times larger inside than out, and to people like Kyle, Max, and Buchner, it was like a candy store. Row upon row upon row upon row of weapons, ranged, edged, and blunt, each one explained by a tag.

"Right," Buchner said, visibly suppressing excitement for the first time Kyle had seen, "we need energy and sonic. Anti-aircraft. Let's say in an hour?"

The men agreed, and set off into the rows of weapons. Kyle somehow managed to not look at and test every single new and exciting weapon he came across, instead strictly sticking to those of the categories Buchner had set out. He walked away with a pair of the plasma edged swords of Arasaka origin, the same ones which he had used in the fight against the Daishono assassins. He also gathered several sonic bazookas, and a few other guns. It took rather more than the hour required to gather what they needed, but Kyle, Max, and Buchner were successful, and got enough weapons for the mission, or so they hoped. The soldiers coming and going paid them not the slightest attention. The trio walked out with quite a large bundle of weapons, and the charge packs which served as their ammunition.

The Sergeant-at-Arms, a portly, good natured Tyrollean man, signed the weapons off without question, but he did issue a warning;

"If you three are somehow high class pirates," the Sergeant-at-Arms warned, "then you won't get far."

"Why?" Kyle asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know," the Sergeant-at-Arms laughed.

Kyle, Max and Buchner left, and climbed back into the car with their haul. Max turned to Kyle and Buchner once he'd started the car and began driving away from Fort Von Griem.

"I'm going to negotiate with Opa about keeping these weapons once the mission is over," Max said.

"Why?" Kyle asked.

"Because I'm right," Buchner said, "the cast off surplus guns and civilian market shit we've had so far are all very good if we were robbing drugstores for a living. But we're not. We need real weapons for the unit."

"It's your funeral," Kyle said, "but he's going to say no."

As Kyle had predicted, Emmermann said no, and while it was all very well for him to give out passes like this, for Max's first mission as leader, the future and equipment of the Medusas was their affair, and he was very offended to be asked for a handout. This and many other things which Kyle hasn't retained were shouted at Max and Buchner, then disseminated to the group the next day on the flight to Esmeralda, as they'd decided to stay in the castle another night.

"You really fucked up, Brother Bear," Harune commented.

"Shut up," Max and Buchner shot back in unison.

"Well, ladies and gents," David said, after several hours in transit, "if the old fuck's coordinates were correct, I believe we have arrived."

All eyes turned towards the windows of Prometheus's bridge, looking down on the planet before them. Esmeralda looked to have been named not only for its mineral deposits, but also for its color. The planet was very verdant and green, likely tropical. David pulled Prometheus into lower orbit.

"Prometheus, do a planetary scan, we need to know the locations of any large human cities," Max said. There was no response, and so with a chuckle, Kyle repeated the order.

“Certainly Captain. Commencing planetary scan,” Prometheus said.

“You’re still not her Captain, Mi Pequeño,” Kyle laughed.

“Kiss my ass,” Max muttered.

“I’m detecting human life in several settlements,” Prometheus said, “and I’m picking up a large settlement, destroyed within approximately the past 168 hours.”

“Coordinates,” Kyle ordered, and Prometheus rattled them off.

“Head in that direction, David,” was Max’s order.

“And if there’s nothing there and the creature has moved on?” Cheng asked.

“Then we’ll follow the destruction,” Max said, “unless anyone has a better suggestion. I’m open.”

“I can view the creature for you,” Harune volunteered, with a smug grin.

“I’m not stopping you, you little shit,” Max shot back, with an equally smug grin.

“I’m older than you,” Harune pointed out.

“Very well. I’m not stopping you, you big shit,” Max said.

“May we please get moving?” David interjected irritably.

“Yes, you may,” Max said decisively.

Harune moved to the front of the bridge, giving himself as good a view of the planet as possible, then after a moment, closing his eyes. The crew instinctively fell silent when he did this, allowing him to concentrate. At last, Harune opened his eyes and turned back to the crew.

“She’s marching south-southeast from the coordinates Prometheus gave us,” Harune said. “She must be 1,000 feet tall and 400 feet wide. Hard to miss, I dare say.”

“Splendid observation,” someone snarked.

Max gave the order, and David tilted Prometheus, aiming in the direction of the coordinates, as well as Harune's instructions, and indeed, the monstrosity they'd come for was "hard to miss." It looked like a gigantic human woman, in the vaguest sense, save for the fact of course that she was made entirely of metal, with pieces of said metal sticking out in the most odd and horrifying ways and places. A helmet of rebar formed the monster's "hair." She had no eyes, and was simply marching along the coast at a determined and alarmingly fast pace for such a beast.

"What the fuck?" the entire crew exclaimed in unison, then quite suddenly, most began falling to the floor, clutching their heads in apparent pain.

"Captain, I'm being pulled in! Help me!" Prometheus exclaimed, emitting a psionic pulse that might be called a "scream."

"David! Get us out of here!" Kyle shouted.

"I've lost fucking control! She's pulling us in!" David shouted.

"Everybody curl up! Hands off the bulkheads!" Harune shouted, and everyone obeyed, too dizzy to think why, and then almost instantly, the monster's terrible presence was gone.

Everyone looked up to see that they were somewhere else on what appeared to be the same coastline. Harune had "jumped" Prometheus to safety, for the moment anyway.

"Apollo, land the ship," Max said, and David did so, landing on the beach.

"Alright. Grab your gear and move. We're evacuating for those hills," Max ordered, pointing to a series of undulating verdant hills off the coast.

"And if that thing shows up? You're just leaving Prometheus for it?" Kyle demanded.

"Yes!" Max barked. "Today, I'm your commanding officer. And I say we abandon ship, so we fucking abandon ship!"

Kyle was a bit taken aback. Not by the order itself, but by the ease and clarity with which Max had taken charge in this situation which had escalated so quickly. Max was a born leader, Kyle realized, or rather would later realize, he was too stressed at the time to think about it much. All hurriedly gathered their weapons and offloaded from the ship.

"We'll be back very soon," Kyle promised Prometheus, who he could tell was quite shaken.

The group, led by Max, headed towards the undulating green hills off shore, which were really more like small mountains. Usefully to the group, they were quite heavily honeycombed with caves. The caves were fairly lined with emeralds, both the usual green and all the colors of the rainbow. A few square feet of this cave would have been worth millions on Earth, or in the galactic market. Kyle decided he'd take a few. If nothing else, they'd facilitate the purchase of a few weapons.

"Right," Max said, "gather round. Harune, keep your eye on that… thing. We need to come up with a plan."

Harune sat, his eyes closed, apparently focusing on the creature with nonlinear sight, while the others sat as comfortably as they reasonably could when sitting on sharp crystals, which is to say, they were in considerable pain.

"It's about 48 kilometers away," Harune said after a moment. "We're safe for a bit."

"Right. Now we take stock and strategize," Max decreed, "lay out weapons and let's talk about where to go from here."

Everyone obeyed, and various ideas were exchanged, most of which were deconstructed and thrown out just as soon as they'd been born. The reality set in quite quickly; the creature was more psionic than the group could easily outmatch, and it

would attempt to pull in and assimilate any metal it could get its figurative hands on. From Harune's sense, the entity had a single goal in mind; expansion.

"Alright," Max said, "so how do you kill something you can't get close to?"

"These weapons operate from a good distance, but I'm not sure about angles with all these hills," Buchner said.

The group fell silent for a moment. Then Kyle had an inspiration.

Kyle: "Little Boy Blue, take my hand and keep watching… it."

Harune: "I think I know what you're thinking Father."

Kyle: "Of course you do. Know-it-all little bastard."

This exchange added some much needed levity to the situation. Once the laughter stopped, Kyle took Harune's hand, and the experiment paid off. Instantly, Kyle could see all that Harune saw through nonlinear sight, and could even control to a limited degree.

"Now we're talking," Kyle said. "Zoom in. Pan over the body."

"With pleasure," Harune said, and began following Kyle's command.

The metal monster, as it turned out, had no clear weak points. It had no eyes, no mouth, no orifices of any kind. All of the beast's joints had an extra layer of shielding, and most of the head and neck were shielded by spikes of rebar and assorted poles the monster had picked up.

"It's coming to some buildings," Kyle said, "hold the view. I want to see how it assimilates."

"What are you thinking?" Cheng asked.

"I'll let you know once I'm proven right," Kyle said smugly. He could practically hear the eye rolls which resulted.

The viewing proved very fruitful, and quite shocking. Rather than destroy the buildings and pick them apart for the metal as

Kyle had imagined, the metal beast blew down the buildings with a telekinetic pulse, and then in an instant, gathered up all the metal, which it hovered in the air for a moment, as if trying to decide where to put them. After a moment, it distributed every last piece of metal all over its body, favoring potential weak points, such as its neck and joints. Kyle opened his eyes to see that Max had taken Harune's other hand, and a smile was slowly spreading across his face.

"I think I know just what to do," Max declared, "and you're all going to hate it."

"Probably for good reason," someone muttered.

"Dad. Can you use your telekinesis remotely, using Harune as a transmitter?" Max asked, ignoring the sarcasm.

"I believe I can," Kyle said then after a pause simply said; "Yes."

"Alright," Max said, "it's simple; we're going to give that thing our guns."

Kyle and Harune both began to smile, realizing Max's idea. The others stared in utter incredulity.

"What are you talking about Sir?" David finally asked. Max thus explained the plan, and it was set into motion. As usual, I'll not tell the conversation, but rather the execution.

The entire op, for the first time anyone present save David had truly witnessed, hinged on Harune's abilities. First, Harune "jumped" the group's various guns directly from the cave into the beast's path. As anticipated, the monster was drawn to the metal, and lifted the guns up into the air telekinetically in order to study them. Franz, as the sniper, held one of Harune's hands, and Kyle the other, to trigger the guns via his own telekinesis. Franz gave Kyle strict directions on aiming, all of course in microseconds of what might be called "nonverbal telepathy."

Almost no words were exchanged, and the three men worked like a single machine.

“Now!” Franz commanded, eventually, as the beast began pulling the guns towards its body for assimilation.

The exercise was an instant success. The guns, all plasma and sonic, and mostly anti-aircraft as Buchner had specified, wreaked havoc on the metal monster. The pulses and blasts tore massive holes through the monstrosity, riddling it with holes like Swiss Cheese, with a deafening and terrible metallic “crunch.” The entity let out the most horrifying telepathic death rattle, and then it collapsed, scattering its pieces across the hills. Kyle and Franz released, and at last Harune took his nonlinear sight off the monster, and immediately fell to his knees and hands, cutting them on the sharp crystals, in obviously exhaustion, his eyes dilated.

“Whoa,” Cheng said, immediately bending and looking over the dazed Harune, “he needs to get back to the ship and be bandaged up. Now.”

“Be careful,” Harune choked, “that thing is still alive.”

“David, go get a shuttle,” Max said, “and what do you mean it’s still alive, Harune?”

“There’s still-moving parts,” Harune explained, slowly regaining lucidity.

David by this point had rushed off to gather the shuttle, as instructed. Max began gathering up the bladed weapons, which Harune hadn’t “jumped” to the AI monster’s location. These weapons Max distributed to all the team members present, except Harune of course.

“Buchner! How do we use this shit?” Max asked.

“It’s fairly simple,” Buchner explained, “just don’t cut yourself. Cutting yourself with a plasma-edged blade is not fun.”

It took a few minutes, but eventually, everyone managed to extend their blades, and the shuttle arrived. Harune was loaded onto it, and the others seated around.

“I brought a first-aid kit,” David said, pulling out from under his seat.

“I’ll stay and bandage him up,” Kyle said.

“No, I can’t spare you,” Max said decisively, “David, you’ll stay and bandage him. The rest of you need to go and finish that bitch.”

“It’s your funeral,” David shrugged, and took off for the approximate location, while Kyle bandaged Harune’s hands and knees.

“Little Boy Blue, are you going to be alright?” Kyle asked, seeing that Harune’s eyes were still quite dilated, and he was still rather dazed.

Harune: “I… think so. Ow! Fuck, not so tight with the bandages!”

“You’ll be fine,” Kyle laughed.

“Alright,” Max said, standing at the front of the shuttle, “if any of you finds a piece still twitching, slice it all to shit. Except the thing’s heart, The Old Man wants that alive.”

“What the fuck is he going to do with it?” someone demanded.

“Do I look like I know?” Max shot back.

David landed the shuttle, and all except for himself and Harune unloaded. Under Max’s direction, the rest of the group split up and headed into the hills. The terrain was very uneven, however the light gravity made navigation considerably easier than it would’ve been on Earth on similar terrain. Kyle saw that this planet, under different circumstances, was the sort of place he might easily fall in love with. The vegetation was thick and lush, and full of wildflowers of all colors, most of them the size

of a large person's head or larger. Birds and small mammals were also quite abundant. This planet was full of life, and Kyle was sad to see it so touched by the artificial.

As Harune had predicted, a few pieces of the metal monstrosity were still twitching, some even still walking autonomously. These were cut down at first, until the group started recovering their guns. The guns were all ultra-reinforced of course, and so had survived the fall of a few hundred feet totally intact. Thus, the group took to shooting the still-moving pieces of the monster.

"I found the heart, I think," Cheng's telepathic "voice" said eventually. "Transmitting my location."

The group converged on Cheng's location, where indeed, the "heart" of the beast lay, that is to say the original briefcase of gears and cogs.

"It has a bullet hole. Shit! He won't like that," Max said.

"I guess it got shot when the thing went down. Bound to happen," Cheng said with a shrug.

Max no doubt accepted this explanation, but Kyle, with a single glance, saw right through it; Cheng had shot the "heart" herself upon finding it. Kyle didn't out her; it was exactly what he'd have done himself.

Max gathered up the damaged "heart," and the group of Max, Kyle, Buchner, Franz, and Cheng returned to the shuttle where Harune and David were waiting. David flew the shuttle back to Prometheus proper, and thus he flew towards the main settlement of Esmeralda, to look for survivors, particularly Ute Schmidt's so-called "marketing director," a man called Gerhard Heil.

The destruction of Esmeralda was as one might expect; total. Not a single structure had been left standing intact, and indeed the overwhelming majority seemed to have been turned to

powder. There were no more than a few hundred survivors, out of a city of about three million. Most disturbing however was the blood and gore. Numerous persons had been trampled, or worse, ground up and spat out by the monstrosity, no doubt in search of their implants, the bodies looking like nothing so much as bloody, raw hamburger meat with pieces of bone. Many districts were utterly awash in blood. The stench, of course, was impossible to describe in words.

"Are you the defense force?" asked one survivor whom the group stopped to speak to.

"No ma'am. We're the Medusas," was Max's reply. It was cheesy, but Kyle still slightly grinned in pride.

Gerhard Heil never reappeared, as it turned out. He was almost certainly a casualty. As Max had predicted, Emmermann was quite put out by the damage to the beast's "heart," and at the fact that Harune needed a regen tank for something as simple as having fallen in a cave. But he accepted it, and instructed the group to fly to his Centurion home, rather than back to Titan.

"I hope he's kept his promise about my spotter," Franz said.

Author's note. A long and, I hope, interesting chapter. The dictator of Titan, Klaus Barbie, is a known figure even on Earth, and so readers may easily research his pre-Titan existence.

Chapter 5

As instructed, David pulled Prometheus up in orbit of Centurion, then lowered her to the usual landing pad on the mountain overlooking Emmermann's house. The same landing pad Kyle had first arrived at, after waking up from the vat. Perhaps it shouldn't have, but returning always made Kyle feel slightly sick.

"Well, you weren't lying about his money," someone observed.

David landed Prometheus, and the crew deboarded onto the cliffside landing pad, with the glass elevator leading down to the valley in which the Emmermann palace was situated. To the surprise of Kyle, Max, Harune, Buchner, David, Franz, and Cheng, the remaining Medusas, consisting of Jack, Hofnitz, Joshie, and Tsurabaya were waiting for them. Alongside them was another young man, unknown to them. He was fairly short, obviously quite muscular, and with auburn hair and hazel eyes. He stepped forward to the arriving group.

"Which one of you is Franz Steinel?" the new young man asked.

"That would be me," Franz volunteered, stepping forward.

"I'm Albert Klein. Your new spotter," the auburn-haired man said, his hand outstretched.

"Fucking finally! Happy to meet you," Franz said, earning an almost audible eye roll from everyone else. With that, the assets set off on foot towards the Emmermann home, their mood lifted.

The lift in mood was rather short-lived, as it turned out. Emmermann was very put out at the state of the mechanical monster's "heart," and at the fact that Harune needed a regen tank for something as simple as having fallen in a cave.

"He really is a faggot!" was Emmermann's proclamation. "And so are the rest of you! Max, don't expect to be put in charge for a good while! Dismissed!"

"Thank you for sticking up for me, Dad, Brother, and so-called friends," Max said sarcastically as the group left Emmermann's study.

"Exactly what should we have done?" Cheng asked in the irritated, exhausted, yet still somehow posh tone she was so fond of adopting.

With no further assignments, the Medusas left the Emmermann estate. As they'd been away from their Camp Hero home for some days, they decided to return. Upon their return, they discovered that there were no assignments from Jimmy, and thus they were free to mill about for the time being. It was fairly early afternoon, Camp Hero time, and so Kyle decided to make his way to the permanent portal to Fort Worden. It had been several weeks since he'd looked in on the Roths.

"And if Jimmy needs us?" someone asked.

"Well, I'm your unit leader, and at Fort Worden I'll be more conveniently located," Kyle said with his signature shrug.

Kyle left with his overnight roll-up bag for the permanent portal to Fort Worden. These days there was no security around them, and one was free to walk through them anytime, though of course one would be scanned at any office on base. Kyle wasn't going to any office of course, and knew his way around. He missed this place, more than he'd realized as he looked at where he'd raised his sons. After a short nostalgic walk, Kyle set towards the Roth's family bunker. It was nearly time for dinner,

going by the Fort Worden clock, and so many people were out and about, returning to their apartments. No one paid Kyle the least attention as he made his way through the base to the Roth bunker and buzzed the intercom.

"Who is it?" Jason Roth's voice echoed through the intercom.

"Jason! My boy! It's your uncle Kyle," was Kyle's reply.

The door buzzed, and Kyle entered, walking down the steps to the Roth family living quarters. Here was where he found Sondra Saunders-Roth, busily tidying up the coffee table.

"Kyle! This is a surprise," Sondra said, "I'll set an extra plate. Ivan, we have company!"

The dinner went over quite well, in spite of Ivan Roth's presence. What they ate and discussed hasn't been retained in my memory, though Kyle detected a certain coldness on Jason's behalf. Perhaps he resented Kyle's absence. Kyle resolved to make these trips more often.

"You'd best stay the night," Ivan Roth advised at the end of dinner, "they blockade the gates at night."

And so Kyle did stay, sleeping the usual 12 hours on the Roth family couch. Morning came, and Kyle returned to the Camp Hero house. He hadn't much been missed, but he found Buchner strumming a guitar. His guitar.

"Did I give you permission?" Kyle demanded.

"Oh, am I a child? I need your fucking permission to touch something?" Buchner demanded.

"Yes! When it's my property! Hand it over right fucking now!" Kyle barked.

"Kyle, calm down," Tsurabaya said, stepping into the room.

"I can fight my own battles," Buchner muttered, setting down the guitar.

"What is wrong?" Tsurabaya demanded.

“I don’t like people I don’t know touching my valuables,” Kyle said defensively.

“Kyle, you know Buchner,” Tsurabaya said.

“No I don’t,” Kyle said, “what exactly do I know about her? I don’t know who she talks to, I don’t know what town she’s from, I don’t know what she likes for dinner. Nothing. She’s a stranger who you forced on me.”

“I’m going to ignore that last comment and assume you’re merely in a bad mood and leave you to it,” Tsurabaya said resignedly, leaving the room to Kyle to sulk about whatever it is Kyle wanted to sulk about. Kyle didn’t know either exactly, just that he was in such a mood. And so, for several hours, Kyle sulked, felt much better after doing it, and was his usual cheerful self when the next assignment came in.

This day’s assignment, as it turned out, was from Jimmy. Kyle, Jack, Tsurabaya, Buchner, Franz Steinel, Albert Klein, Harune, Max, Joshie, and Hofnitz all received messages on their glass pads; convene and prepare for a trip.

“Well well, take a look Yosh,” Jack said, “it’s our old friend Beirut.”

As Jack had pointed out, the Medusas were being sent to Beirut, Lebanon, in the year 1983. At least, this was where they’d be starting out, before going into the countryside for some routine “gate control,” as described in the previous volume.

“Back to scraping up shit,” David muttered ruefully.

“I think it’ll be fun!” Joshie said.

“Yes, more fucking desert,” Harune grumbled.

“There are no deserts in Lebanon,” at least three Medusas explained.

“Whatever. Some other assorted shithole,” Harune said. His words were of complaint, but his tone was cheerful.

“What I want to know is,” someone, perhaps a Steinel, commented, “are we getting paid?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Kyle said dryly. “It’s Jimmy.”

Regardless of their payment status, the group had very clear instructions; report to the costume department, (described in the second volume) and spend the next several days memorizing their cover stories, before heading to Lebanon at last. A fairly standard set of instructions. What was unusual was that they were also being told to report to the Kodak offices within the Camp Hero corporate annex. Few of the Medusas had ever even entered one of these offices, much less done business there, save Tsurabaya, who of course had at one time had an office within the Arasaka sub-annex.

“What would they even have in the Kodak annex?” someone wondered.

“Cameras, I imagine,” someone else contributed, rather unhelpfully.

“Only one way to find out. Come with me Kyle,” Jack said, and off they went to the mysterious Kodak sub-annex.

The Kodak sub-annex was a good deal larger and more impressive than Kyle or Jack had likely anticipated. The door from the hallway of the corporate annex swung open into what looked more like a grand old train station than anything at Camp Hero. The area accessible to the public was a single long, wide hallway, one wall of which was covered in a very long mural, showing the coastline of Long Island, while running along the other was a single long desk, divided into cubicles, like a ticketing office. A grand chandelier hung from the middle of the room, but unlike the usual crystals, this chandelier was adorned with camera lenses of all types.

“They sure are absorbed in their craft,” Jack muttered.

The Medusas assignment sheet had led them to these offices, with specific instructions to pick up a package from Mary at Desk Six. By "Desk Six," the men assumed the instructions meant the sixth segment of the single desk which ran the length of the room. And so this was where they went, and without a word, the young woman seated there reached under her segment of the desk and withdrew three cardboard boxes, which she handed over to the men.

"If you break anything, it comes out of your wallets," she cautioned sharply, with a manufactured grin. And thus Kyle and Jack left, both no doubt dying of curiosity as to the contents of their packages. Thus they returned to the house to open them.

As it turned out, the packages held something very useful indeed. Several small devices, each resembling a dragonfly, the "eyes" of which were fisheye camera lenses. These were controlled by tiny handheld devices, out of which folded little screens, from which one could see what the cameras saw. While modern readers would call such devices "drones," this term did not exist at the time the Medusas encountered such technology, and so I'll not use it. Rather, the instruction manual for the devices referred to them as "Autonomous Reconnaissance Cameras," or ARCs. This is the term I'll use going forward.

"Well well," Max commented, "perhaps my warning was listened to."

No one asked what he meant, but it's reasonable to assume that he meant his warning given at Andrew Flynn's funeral, that the reason for Project Phoenix's ludicrously high turnover rate was due, in large part, to the blindness of the assets as to what would be expected of them on their operations.

"Right," Kyle said, "you all know the drill. Start memorizing your stories so we can go."

The Medusas' collective cover story, it turned out, was as photojournalists for the (non existent) San Francisco Morning Star. They'd arrive just near an airfield at Beirut airport, from which they'd circumnavigate to one of the roads leading into the city, where they'd most likely be picked up by military car and driven into the city, to begin their reconnaissance of the site where they'd be carrying out their work. To start, the group headed to the costumerie, in order to be outfitted. It was no doubt a somewhat surreal experience for Kyle, Max, and Jack, walking this route they hadn't walked since before the conclusion of The Reign of Terror.

"Like bad pennies, you keep coming back," a familiar voice said from among the synonymously familiar ocean of fabric. It was, of course, Angelique Toussaint.

"We could say the same about you!" Jack shot back. Angelique appeared from behind whatever mountainous rack she'd been behind just then, with a ghost of a smile across her face.

"Some fresh blood," Angelique said hungrily upon seeing all the Medusas, making several of them look rather uncomfortable, "now let's outfit you all."

Angelique outfitted the assets as she always did; quietly and efficiently, with outfits that were perfect for the occasion, but not so perfect as to look excessively stereotypical, and of course all the clothes had ample secret pockets in which to hide whatever needed to be hidden. It was, in a word; perfect. The handing out of documents and luggage was the same.

The jump through the portal went off without a hitch. Kyle noted that it was once again young Mark Muehlbauer operating the navigation chair which opened the portal. It seemed that some things never changed, though Mark seemed much happier and better nourished, and the portal room was no longer so blockaded by rapacious looking guards.

One note I'd like to make, before describing the mission, is that I consider it highly possible that this operation occurred in a Lebanon in an alternate reality, as it stretches credibility that the events which followed could have been so completely covered up within our reality.

The Medusas emerged just where they'd been told they'd emerge; in between two metal sheds, at the edge of an airfield. There seemed to be quite a number of these types of buildings in the area. The Medusas ducked into one to strategize.

"Right," someone said, "we may as well use the ARCs."

"I'll operate them," Albert Klein volunteered.

"Why you?" Harune asked, handing the ARCs over. As the most innocent looking, Harune was the chosen pack mule for the bits of technology which the group carried.

"I'm the spotter. It's my job," Klein said with a matter-of-fact shrug.

"And who can argue with that?" Franz said, earning an eye roll from all present, as well as a few middle fingers. But none argued as Klein began operating the ARC.

Exiting Beirut airport was going to be a good deal more difficult than anticipated, it turned out. The airport was surrounded in its entirety by several layers of electric barbed wire fences, the tops of which held CCTV cameras, and the outer perimeter of which was heavily patrolled.

"New plan," Jack said after a moment of consideration. "We're going in through the airport itself."

"How the fuck are we doing that?" Hofnitz demanded.

"Simple," Jack said, "this airport must have a baggage loading area, and porters. We walk up and start carrying bags inside when the next flight lands. Act like we own the place."

"Fucking insanity. It might just work," Tsurabaya commented jokingly.

“Yes indeed,” Jack said, stepping out of the shed to head for the runway. None of the Medusas followed.

“You heard the man. Move your asses!” Kyle barked, and they begrudgingly obeyed, Klein following last as he had to pilot back and retrieve the ARC.

“I’ve disabled the CCTV cameras,” Harune said, “but they’ll notice. We had best move fast.”

No one bothered to ask Harune how he’d done such a thing; they knew better than to doubt by now.

As it turned out, Jack’s ridiculous scheme did work out. That’s not to say there weren’t problems; there were. Namely, the airport already had luggage porters, all of whom put in an appearance at the plane which landed, a large affair from somewhere in the Mediterranean. But a bit of cash went a long way in this place, and thus, the Medusas were able to gain access to the airport. All the while, they tried to not be too alarmed by the obvious sounds of shelling and urban warfare, which were alarmingly close.

Beirut airport, it transpired, was a rather depressing sight. It was clearly in need of a revival, as indicated by the many departure gates and service desks, nearly all of which were now inactive. Somewhat more alarming was the rather high preponderance of bullet holes. Behind one desk, the group saw a calendar, which told them that it was 1979, not 1983 as their brief had told them.

“Always another fucking test,” Kyle muttered.

“Let’s take a service bus,” Hofnitz, who had left the group to find transport, said. “The driver said we ride half off if I join his harem, so I said yes.”

The sight of the so-called “service bus” drew perhaps even more laughter than the agreement made to ride on it had. It was not so much a “bus” as a very old Volkswagen van, which at one

time had presumably been bright red, but was now an odd shade of faded coral, interspersed with rust. The “bus” had no doors to speak of. Taped on either side of the cabin was a large piece of cardboard, displaying the driver’s destinations, prices conspicuously absent. It was, all in all, exactly what one might have expected. The driver was very friendly however, and happily drove the Medusas to the hotel district in Islamic East Beirut.

On the drive to the hotel district, Kyle was, as he was so often prone to do, struck by what lay underneath the surface of this peculiar place he was in. In happier times, it must be a tourist's paradise, given the sheer number of beautiful buildings, cafes, and restaurants which were now almost all shuttered and riddled with bullet holes, their windows blown out and their sidewalks cratered by mortars and worse. The natural Levantine scenery of hills and Mediterranean remained gorgeous of course, and whenever one of the Medusas leaned out of the bus to take a look, they were always met with at least one smiling local. Once again, it was a place aching for a revival.

One slightly alarming aspect was the frequent checkpoints. Bribing one’s way through was quite possible at the checkpoints operated by the various Arab factions in the city, however the driver warned the Medusas that, if they were staying in Beirut for any length of time, they would eventually encounter American and Israeli checkpoints, where money didn’t serve as a passport. But it did at least get the group to the hotel district.

“You have no documents, you want here,” the driver said, dropping the group in front of one particular hotel called “Le Commodore.”

“Right,” Kyle said, “most of you, go inside and get rooms. Harune, come with me.”

The bus driver was paid, (with Hofnitz “promising” she’d keep her agreement) the meager luggage was unloaded, and most of

the Medusas, save Kyle and Harune, entered the massive Le Commodore hotel. Kyle and Harune remained on the street.

"Why'd it have to be me, Father?" Harune asked, almost hostile.

"Because if we get into trouble, I want someone who can jump us out," Kyle stated matter-of-factly. "Now, weapons. Let's head for the bazaar. There must be one in this area."

This last statement was punctuated by the unmistakable sound of a firefight starting, no more than a few blocks away. A hopeful sign, Kyle thought optimistically. Harune was visibly less hopeful.

Kyle and Harune thus set out into the bizarre world of central Beirut. In this area, the land frequented by foreigners, life continued with a facade of normalcy, with restaurants and shops still largely open, though the buildings were still quite heavily war damaged, and the homeless population alarmingly high, as was the number of informal refuge camps and Red Cross relief facilities. The high proportion of armed soldiers was oddly comforting. At several points, Kyle and Harune ran into American soldiers, and at one point, an officer of some rank stopped them.

"What paper are you boys from?" the officer, a bald Nordic giant with an indeterminate American accent, asked.

"The San Francisco Morning Star!" Harune volunteered cheerfully. The officer's eyes narrowed instantly.

"Come with me," the officer said, waving Kyle and Harune into a narrow alleyway.

"Is there a problem Sir?" Kyle asked.

"Don't play stupid," the officer said. "It amazes me how you boys from Langley just get more and more obvious with each passing day. You want weapons? Go to Selim in the Souk el

Sayagheen in Tripoli. Least you could do is buy from someone who funnels money back to us. Now fuck off, both of you."

And with that, the officer turned and left, leaving Kyle and Harune in the alleyway to stare ruefully at each other.

Harune: "What the fuck is Langley?"

Kyle: "No idea. But that's a lucky break we just caught."

Harune: "Father, does it not seem strange to you, how easily we seem to find our way around these situations? There's always a lucky break."

Kyle: "Maybe life isn't as difficult as we're supposed to think."

It was a poignant remark, but it existed only to disguise Kyle's private thoughts, which was that he had indeed noticed that things seemed too easy lately, as if prearranged by some mysterious force. Or simply by Emmermann. Privately, Kyle was determined to find the source, if there was one.

Kyle and Harune apparently made a wrong turn on their way back to Le Commodore Hotel, as they found themselves on a few streets they didn't recognize, which at first wasn't alarming. Indeed, this little warren seemed less dangerous than the one they'd come through, as refugee camps were less common, and the various restaurants were rather more upmarket. Appearances, however, were deceiving.

Kyle and Harune were making their way down a surprisingly intact (or perhaps freshly repaired) sidewalk, when a black van came speeding onto the street, coming to a grinding halt in front of a large cafe. This in itself was not a notable event; the driving habits here weren't so much chaotic as actively hostile to human life. Thus, it was surprising to Kyle when Harune yanked on Kyle's arm at the sight of the black van, pulling Kyle between two buildings.

Kyle: "Kid, what the fuck is wrong?"

Harune: "As soon as that van opens, shooting starts."

Kyle: “What are you-“

Kyle’s question was cut off by the unmistakable retort of several AKM rifles firing, and the equally unmistakable screams and death rattles which usually follow. Just as Kyle’s programming and Harune’s training had taught them they must, they dove to the ground, and Kyle commando crawled to asses the situation.

By now, within seconds, a street battle was beginning. Kyle had instantly clocked the sounds of the initial attack as having come from three rifles, and he was fairly sure he could spot the perpetrators, as they wore masks, and were now engaging with the street’s residents from cover behind vehicles and the insides of buildings. Atop the buildings, Kyle clocked several snipers, who seemed to be joining the initial interlopers, in a sort of reverse ambush on this street, some more masked shooters having come out of the buildings themselves.

“Stay covered!” Kyle barked at Harune, then without waiting for any more input, charged the nearest terrorist.

It was over in an instant, of course. The terrorist, whom Kyle noticed wore a massive gold cross, barely had time to see Kyle coming before Kyle delivered a decisive punch to the jaw, which shattered his jawbone and snapped his neck cleanly, killing him before his body had hit the ground, allowing Kyle to liberate his rifle and knife. Less pleasant was the feeling of a bullet in Kyle’s back. Being a standard issue, regular velocity round, the bullet barely broke through Kyle’s skin, but it stung quite severely. But Kyle, as his program had made him able to do, instantly calculated the angle, and so he spun around and with a single shot, dispatched the man who had shot him, who fell from a second story window across the street. As luck would have it, this was the last bullet in the gun Kyle had grabbed, and thus he dove into the little sea of cars near him.

Kyle heard the sound of a child's voice behind one car, and he hurriedly crawled around it to see a boy, no older than nine, nervously clutching a large pistol in a rather alarming fashion and praying some Islamic recitation. Very gently, Kyle put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I'm on your side my boy. Now hand me that gun before you kill yourself," Kyle said calmly, in his most elegant Arabic, ignoring an errant bullet which narrowly missed his neck. The boy obeyed.

"You're a brave soldier man," Kyle said, knowing from experience that this always worked in such situations and indeed the boy began to smile, "now-"

Kyle's words were cut off by another errant bullet, this one going directly through the boy's head, killing him instantly. As one might expect, tactical considerations vanished from Kyle's mind at this, and he switched into his berserker mindset.

"Hey motherfuckers!" Kyle screamed, taking the pistol and rushing into the street, firing at any glint of gold he saw, and taking out all the snipers.

It was a blur that was over almost as soon as it had begun. At one point, Kyle was grabbed from behind, a knife at his throat, and like nothing, Kyle grabbed the fist holding the knife, crushing the bones almost to powder, but before the attacker could even register this, his neck was snapped.

One stubborn terrorist managed to survive long enough to reenter the black van and charge it at Kyle. In response, Kyle fired, not at the windshield, but directly at the van's tires and engine block, causing it to swerve wildly and crash onto several of the smaller cars at the roadside, the driver's door facing Kyle, who fired four times through said driver's door at the terrorist. He then approached, finding that the door handle was broken, so Kyle simply punched out the window, grabbed the door that

way, and ripped it off the van entirely. Inside, he found the terrorist, badly wounded, but still alive. The terrorist clutched his bloodied gold cross and held it towards Kyle desperately.

"In the name of Jesus Christ-" he began desperately, in Armenian accented Latin.

"Shut your fucking hole," Kyle said coldly, and shot the man in the face at near point blank range, causing the cab of the van to be painted with brains and blood.

His artificial adrenaline-like instincts slowly fading, Kyle dropped the gun and stepped onto the now deathly quiet street, seeing many curious and frightened faces looking out from the now bullet-hole-riddled businesses on the street.

"You owe me your lives. But your silence and a proper burial for the boy behind the yellow sedan will do," Kyle said, his hands held up, and when no shots rang out, he turned and ran back towards Harune.

"Allah be with you!" a woman's voice shouted earnestly from the crowd.

"Just what they need; more religion," Kyle thought.

Kyle found Harune standing over a corpse, holding a large combat knife. The corpse didn't wear the gold cross, but Kyle was sure Harune had his reasons, which he chose not to ask.

"You alright?" Kyle asked, searching the corpse and liberating a .45.

"Yes Father. You're not. You've been shot at least five times," Harune pointed out.

"I'm fine, they're barely flesh wounds," Kyle said, looking down at himself. In his primal, pseudo adrenaline rage, he'd not even felt himself being shot. But still, he didn't worry, as not only was his torso designed to be all artificial ribs and muscle, but his design also was such that the bullets would be spat out,

and the wounds would seal, ensuring complete healing in a few hours.

"Your clothes are ripped to shreds," Harune added.

"I noticed," Kyle said briskly, "now, jump us to the hotel."

Harune nodded, took Kyle's hand, and "jumped" them to the hotel district. It was Kyle's first time being a subject of one of Harune's "jumps," and it was a very strange experience. It lasted no more than one or two seconds, but during that one or two seconds, the subject and presumably the "jumper" found themselves in an endless tunnel of white light, with no perceptible body. It was very unnerving, brief as it was.

Harune "jumped" himself and Kyle to another little passage between buildings, a peak out of which showed that they were almost directly across the street from Le Commodore Hotel.

"Now what do we do?" Harune asked.

"We walk through the front door. You think they've never seen a bloodied man before?" Kyle quipped, and before Harune could stop him, strode confidently across the street, expertly dodging anyone holding a camera, and after a moment, Harune followed.

The inside of Le Commodore hotel was perhaps what one might have expected; poorly lit and rather seedy, with the lobby crowded with hawkers in tiny kiosks selling things such as knockoff cameras, perfumes, paperback books, a bewildering array of cigarettes, currency exchange, and tiny bottles of alcohol, illegal in Islamic East Beirut. The hotel also had a full post office and well equipped coffee and smoke shop, both no doubt very overpriced, but convenient and safe. One rather useful thing was that photography was strictly forbidden. After a rapid perusal and clocking of entries and exits, Kyle and Harune approached the front desk.

“Good afternoon Sirs. Would you prefer artillery or car bomb views?” the young man behind the desk asked cheerfully, already consulting a list of available rooms.

“Just wherever you’ve put our friends from the San Francisco Morning Star,” Kyle said, not in the mood for humor.

“Of course. You’ll be on the sixth floor, artillery side, if you are alright with that. What names shall I put down?” the young man asked, his pen poised.

“Carter and Tanaka,” Kyle said, using the aliases given them in their mission brief. The bus driver had been correct; identification was not asked for, and the hotel had no facilities for credit cards.

“Very well,” the young man said, after writing the aliases in the guestbook, “and will you be requiring our in house doctor, Mr. Carter?”

"No, thank you," Kyle said decisively.

With that, the young concierge (whom Kyle believes was called Hamza) took the two room keys from somewhere underneath the desk. Kyle and Harune handed over their deposits, and Hamza led them to the elevator.

“Thank you. We’ll take it from here,” Harune said decisively, and Hamza left them.

“Sorry kid, we’re taking the stairs,” Kyle said, “don’t want to be trapped in the elevator if there’s a power outage or a bomb drops.”

Thus, Kyle and Harune located the stairs and thus climbed them to the sixth floor. They weren’t alone; Kyle was clearly not the only one who’d thought of the risk. But fortunately, none of the other guests seemed to have much interest in them either, and thus Kyle and Harune reached the sixth floor of Le Commodore unmolested. Buchner stood in the hall, holding their roll-up bags.

“You look like hell, as the Americans say,” Buchner observed, handing over the bags, “got anything for me?”

“A single .45,” Kyle said, hurriedly handing it over and turning to his room.

“Not in much of a talking mood?” Buchner needled.

“A kid died in my arms about 20 minutes ago, so I think not,” Kyle said, unlocking the door to his room, entering, and slamming it decisively.

In spite of the seediness of the hotel, the room itself was quite (for 1979) modern and somewhat outfitted and clean. Kyle estimated it was about 1/3rd as good as it should have been for the price, which was more than he’d expected.

Kyle did the usual sweeping of the room for bugs, (there were none) then slipped out of his rather shredded clothes, stepping into the blissfully warm and high pressure shower. As so often occurs, the shower led to relaxation, and the relaxation led to reflection. And so, for a few minutes, Kyle mourned the boy who’d died inches from him, then compartmentalized the experience and dressed in fresh clothes. His old ones would need to be burned, not only because of the state they were in, but also to stop any samples of Blood-2 from escaping into the public, which would be a risk if Kyle were to simply throw his clothes in the trash.

Once showered and refreshed, Kyle returned to his room, finding a paper slipped under his door. The paper read “room 618,” in what Kyle recognized as Joshie’s handwriting. This was where Kyle next went. By now, it was nearing sunset.

Room 618 was a corner room, and after being admitted, Kyle saw that it was also a suite, with a small sitting room and a balcony overlooking the streets. As young Hamza had promised, there were indeed ample views of destruction down below. The

Medusas sat around the room, with Klein in one chair piloting the ARC.

"What's being surveyed?" Kyle asked, coming to look over Klein's shoulder.

"The coordinates we were given," Klein explained. "Signs of burrowing, no sign of a gate yet, but it's the mountains. Thing is probably either jumping, or closed altogether."

Kyle: "Any occupants in the area?"

Klein: "A few wineries, and one good-sized military camp."

Kyle: "Whose military camp?"

Klein: "Well, judging by the Star of David on their flag, probably not the cream of the crop, as humanity goes."

"We have enough information to head out there," Joshie cut in, "we just need more equipment."

"And transportation," Tsurabaya added. "We need a car."

"And I need medical supplies," Hofnitz added.

"We'll start gathering in the morning," Jack concluded, "where do we get weapons?"

"Selim in Tripoli, apparently," Harune said ruefully, "and I have a feeling our money is wearing thin already. So we need to get some of that too."

For the next couple of hours, this thing and that were discussed back and forth, back and forth, such that Kyle hasn't bothered to retain it. Suffice to say, the necessary plans were made, and it was decided that dinnertime had come. Several wanted to go out, but Kyle and Jack forbade it in no uncertain terms. There were too many borderline voyeuristic journalists in this part of town, clicking away at every little thing. Thus, room service was ordered, cutting even further into the Medusas already limited budget. It was decided that getting money was the first order of business.

This order of business, fortunately, was one of the simplest. The foyer, bar, restaurant, and rooftop pool of Le Commodore were seemingly always packed with person with stuffed wallets, which they were either too stupid or too distracted to watch, not to mention the several currency exchange stands in the front of the hotel. The first tactic was Harune's; stare at a bulging pocket, "jump" the contents out, remove much of the cash, and then "jump" the now much lighter wallets back to their owners. This worked for two days, before it was decided that another tactic was needed, as it was only a matter of time before some of the guests who'd been robbed began remembering seeing a tall Japanese man staring hungrily at their overflowing pockets. The second solution came from an unexpected source; Elena Kovac.

"I can pick pockets. I'm a regular Houdini," Kovac stated.

"Where did you learn that skill?" Max asked suspiciously.

"Oh Max. How else could I, a poor girl all alone, survive on the mean streets of communist Dubrovnik?" Kovac asked, gasping breathlessly, clutching her chest as though having palpitations, with fake tears welling up in her eyes.

"Women," Max muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Whatever you say," someone interjected, "just bring us some money."

Kovac did as ordered. After several days of Harune and Kovac's combined efforts, the Medusas had gathered the equivalent of about 1,000 dollars, spread across various currencies, some of which were quite easy to exchange on the streets, and some of which were not. It was decided that the people the Medusas liked best were those who carried French Francs, American Dollars, and Pounds Sterling, as these were easily changeable at any money changer. The ones they liked least were those carrying Israeli Shekels, Soviet Rubles, and Spanish

Pesetas, which were nearly impossible to exchange. The next order of business, of course, was acquiring transportation.

Acquiring transit was also a fairly simple procedure, it turned out. The Medusas happened to run across the same bus driver who had conveyed them from Beirut airport to Le Commodore. When another female Medusa was promised to join his harem, he was more than happy to lend them his van for a few days. The group thus bought a few local clothes so as to blend in, along with the weapons they'd smuggled along, and set off for the site.

The Medusas chose, at least for the moment, to bypass Selim in Tripoli. Along with themselves, in their bags, they'd managed to smuggle five collapsible plasma-edged swords, and three rail-guns, disassembled, which they decided had to be sufficient for the mission. They'd lost enough time.

A note should be made as to how the Medusas decided where to target, as well as what led them to decide to head for their chosen spot without first gathering a higher volume of weapons.

Along with their few weapons, clothing, and the ARCs, the crew had brought a pair of wrist computers. These computers, in addition to mapping, had a function which allowed them to tap into radio signals from a distance. From this, they'd gleaned two things; that soldiers in southeast Lebanon were experiencing occasional encounters with what sounded like Martian Deinonychoids, and that there was a radius of about five square miles which was a radio blackout zone, indicating that here was the location of the gate. Thus, here was where the Medusas drove. They'd managed, using the ARC, to map a route past any of checkpoints. They spent a good deal more on gas than was ideal in order to take this route, but it was worth it.

After several hours, the Medusas arrived at last to somewhere near their destination. Jack ordered them to stop about half a

mile from the actual spot, and do another scan of the area with the ARC. Klein (by now given the callsign Patrocles) thus pulled out the ARC to follow this order, then immediately frowned.

Franz: "What's going on?"

Klein: "The signal is fucked. I can't seem to make it work."

Jack: "Alright. Then some of us go and the rest of you stay here, with one gun."

The group talked, and those leaving with the first two guns and most of the swords were decided on; Kyle, Max, Tsurabaya, Buchner, Franz, Klein, Cheng, and Joshie left. The remaining Medusas stayed in the van, watching in all directions for anything on the approach.

Kyle and company stood in broad formation, their guns and swords at ready. This area, part of the Bekaa Valley, was quite uneven and heavily forested with Cedars of Lebanon, dotted with wineries. Out here it was almost possible to forget the war altogether, were it not for the frequent military trucks and the equally frequent piles of bombed out cars on the roadside. But in the remote corner the Medusas had reached, even these signs were hidden, and thus one was able to truly note the breath-taking beauty of the area, and the pleasant scent of the cedars wafting through the air. It was into these cedars that Kyle and company plunged.

The group hadn't trudged long before coming across something; a tunnel into the ground, clearly artificially carved. Joshie raised his sword and began to approach.

"Hold!" Kyle ordered telepathically. "You don't know where that goes!"

All of Kyle's group approached the freshly bored tunnel, weapons at ready. As they'd been trained, they surrounded the tunnel, and simply stood there for several minutes, to ensure

nothing would emerge. When nothing appeared, the group carefully plunged into the tunnel, Kyle in lead. In the tunnel, they found essentially nothing. It was quite long however, and must have wound half a mile or more before emerging into another valley, near the edge of a winery.

Off in the distance, Kyle spotted movement, and so held up his fist to stop the rest of the crew. They stopped. Kyle then raised his binoculars to see the cause of the movement, and saw three Deinonychoids in the distance, congregated around what appeared to be several large, black boxes. Franz crept up beside Kyle.

"Mind if I have a look?" Franz asked.

"Alright, but don't shoot," Kyle said, noticing Franz's twitchy trigger finger.

"You're no fun," Franz grumbled, taking the binoculars. After a moment, he handed them to Klein, to survey the landscape at large.

For several moments, Kyle and the others communicated, all in telepathy of course; they didn't wish to be overheard. In the end, Kyle sent up a telepathic order to the Medusas remaining in the van; "Standby." Then, he gave Franz the order to fire on the three Deinonychoids. Franz did so, taking out three with two shots. Annoying he might be, but none could say that Franz wasn't a hell of a shot.

For a moment, all seemed calm. Then, as Kyle had anticipated it might, all hell broke loose, and within moments, a small war was being fought. From behind seemingly every blindspot, Deinonychoids emerged, most of them with rifles.

"Oh fuck," Max said.

"Positions! Atalanta, take the gun!" Kyle screamed, turning just long enough to throw it to Buchner, whom he was relatively certain was the least enhanced person present.

Kyle threw his KA-bar then, catching it midair with telekinesis, which he used to push the knife through the air in a broad sweeping motion, cutting through a line of at least six Deinonychoids, which then either fell over dead or clutching their wounds, before Kyle pulled the knife home, a bit of pressure relieved, though by now, projectiles were beginning to fly.

Kyle: "Alectrona, get your ass over here! Hades, cover us!"

Cheng, the "Alectrona" in question, rallied to Kyle's side behind a particularly large cedar, clutching one of the extendable plasma-edged katanas.

"Yes Sir?" Cheng asked, almost unnaturally calm.

"We don't have much of a chance at distance," Kyle explained, "the rest of them are going to cover us. You and I are going to close the distance. Can you do that Alectrona?"

Cheng: "Yes Sir I can!"

Kyle: "That's the spirit."

Almost as if on cue, several Deinonychoids appeared just then behind Kyle and company's position, themselves trying to close the distance. For the second time in a short period, Kyle felt his berserker instincts activated, and he flew into a primal yet focused rampage, cutting and punching his way through Deinonychoids, at one point decapitating one with his hands when it loomed over Max. The tide began to turn when, all at once, the remaining Medusas appeared from nowhere in the woods.

"Harune," Kyle realized with a slight smile.

"Fan out! Fuck 'em up! We don't fail!" Jack ordered. Kyle felt the oddest sense of deja vu at this order.

The battle which followed was pure pandaemonium, yet somehow orderly. To start, the three guns lined up, taking out what they could, and meanwhile, the remaining Medusas, with their swords and their knives, fanned out, cutting down

Deinonychoids initially, until they reached the ones with guns, which seemed to be plasma SMGs, which the Medusas were only too happy to take, at which point the tide of battle began turning in their favor. The Deinonychoids, ferocious and fearless though they certainly were, had not come prepared for super-human soldiers who outmatched them one on one, every time, in one way or another.

At one point, Kyle heard the unmistakable crack of an STG-44 rifle, and the thud of a choked shotgun. The sources were not immediately visible, and thus, Kyle didn't have the time to worry. He found the source of the STG fire quite decisively however, when he dove behind a rock, deep in the vineyard for cover, unleashed a spray of fire at a group of Deinonychoids, then glanced at his surroundings. Kyle found himself next to a man; tall, bearded, with light brown skin and pale blue eyes, he was unmistakably Lebanese, and a civilian, judging by his ordinary clothing.

"Who the fuck are you?" the man asked.

"I'm shooting in the right direction, aren't I?" Kyle said, then stood and fired, saving the wide eyed civilian from a charging Deinonychoid.

By this point, the fighting had begun to die down. The Deinonychoids (at least the living ones) were running thin. The Medusas had begun to regroup.

"Dad, it looks like they're retreating," Max said at last. Kyle surveyed the scene and agreed, wincing at the amount of blood and the rather tremendous damage to the winery.

"Don't shoot!" Kyle ordered, seeing the retreating Deinonychoids.

"Why in the fuck not?" Joshie demanded.

“Because, you trigger-happy bastard, if they’re retreating, they have a base. That’s our goal,” Kyle explained condescendingly.

“Back to the van,” Jack said.

“No one goes anywhere,” a voice at the Medusas' back said in Arabic, racking the bolt on a rifle. They turned slowly to see the civilian man whom Kyle had encountered earlier, aiming his STG at them. More alarming was that near him was a young boy, clutching a pump shotgun.

“They’ve got balls, I’ll say that much,” Kovac murmured.

Kyle and Jack glanced at each other, and gave a quick nod, making a snap decision to raise their guns above their heads and begin lowering them. The other Medusas, though incredulous, followed their leaders. The civilians kept their guns raised, but did seem to relax somewhat.

“Is the boy your son?” Kyle asked.

“Yes,” the man said suspiciously.

“Habibi,” Kyle said calmly, “the last thing I, or any of my friends wants is to harm you or your family.”

“Are you with the Jews?” the boy asked.

“Fuck no,” Jack replied, in accented but understandable Arabic, a language no one had known Jack understood.

“Habibi, I’m begging you, from one father to another; walk away,” Kyle said earnestly, locking eyes with the man.

A long pause, and the man and boy at last lowered their guns.

“Do you have a place to stay?” the man asked, his tone changed entirely.

“Not much of one,” Jack said with a shrug.

“The women can come up to the house, my wife will get them some clothes, you men can use the outdoor shower behind the barn over there. You’ll find my worker’s clothes in a little shed back there. You all smell like sheep shit. I’m Abdul, this here is

Michael," the man said in proper introduction. The Medusas somehow managed to not crack up at the instant change of tone.

On the drive towards the winery buildings, high on the incline, Kyle went and walked with Abdul.

Abdul: "Where are you from? What is your name Brother?"

Kyle: "Germany, by way of New York, to make a long story short."

Abdul: "You're a father? Where are your children?"

Kyle: "Ah. That slender Japanese young man and that handsome dark-haired bastard? Those are my sons."

Abdul: "You must be proud to have raised young men like them."

Kyle: "The Lord himself couldn't be more proud of his sons."

One had to hand it to Kyle; he knew how to read his audience. He'd deduced that, being the owner of a vineyard, this man must be some flavor of Christian, and a fairly traditional one, given his insistence on separating the sexes and his first questions being directed at Kyle's family life.

Abdul: "Yes. How old are you Brother? You don't look more than a decade older than your boys."

Kyle: "If I could answer that question, I would do so."

The Medusas and their hosts reached a few branching pathways, leading up to the sprawling stone farmhouse and the various industrial buildings of the winery. The hosts and the women headed for the house, while the men split off towards a massive red barn, as Abdul had directed. In a shed, they indeed found many clean worker's clothes, and an outdoor shower, which they were only too happy to avail themselves of.

"Oh boys. Guess what I found?" Harune asked at one point, looking in on a group of bathers.

"Women, I hope?" Tsurabaya, one of the bathers, said.

“Close. Wine!” Harune said, pulling a bottle from behind his back.

“We’ll take that up to the house and pay for it,” Kyle said firmly.

“Fucking killjoy,” Joshie said with a dirty look on his face.

Washed and changed, the male Medusas set off up to the house. This house was a rather sprawling, single story, stone affair, very Mediterranean. The house had a large wrap around porch, on which a dinner table was being set up by Abdul and a beautiful woman who must’ve been his wife, who introduced herself as Fatima and invited her guests to have seats on the various couches around the porch. Fatima spoke French, perhaps hoping her guests would understand, and a few of them did.

Kyle noticed that Max sat at one couch, and young Michael immediately ran to his side, the two having obviously already started a friendship, likely on the walk up from the vineyard. The sight made Kyle very happy, and also gave him an idea, which he determined to confer with Jack about at the earliest opportunity. Eventually, dinner was served, along with the local wine. Both were delicious.

“I was speaking with my husband,” Fatima said at one point, “he and I both seem a bit confused as to where you’re from.”

“Not much of any place,” Franz said with a laugh.

“Who are you anyway?” Fatima asked, not hostile, but bewildered.

“Nobody. Just making sure things happen as they should,” Kyle said.

The dinner, a typical Mediterranean communal spread of fish, meat, and vegetables, with baklava for desert, was finished, and cigarettes were handed out, everyone making themselves comfortable around the porch. Abdul had arranged for the male

Medusas to stay in the workers' bunks in the loft of the barn they'd visited earlier, once again insisting on the women staying in the main house. Kyle was quite certain he'd never seen persons so glad to have guests, even ones who'd just saved their lives.

At one point, Kyle saw Hofnitz leaning against the railing of the porch, looking out over the winery and the mountains, the sky now studded with stars.

Kyle: "Beautiful night. Beautiful view."

Hofnitz: "Yes. Especially with those things still out there. Will they be back?"

"Yes they most certainly will," Jack said, stepping next to them. "Fuck, this wine is good."

"Better watch your language at this dinner table I think," Kyle chuckled.

"When?" Hofnitz asked, ignoring the humorous interchange.

"Who knows? Let's ask them," Jack said.

A pause.

"Are you saying you want to catch one and interrogate it? Are you insane?" Kyle asked.

"Am I?" Jack asked.

"I need more wine," Hofnitz said.

Eventually, the evening wound down, and the male Medusas were handed the keys to the barn, and Abdul's assurance that they could take as much wine as they wished when leaving in the morning, or whenever they chose to leave, as payment for saving his family's life and business. Kyle saw the opportunity and pulled Abdul aside, off the porch and out of earshot.

Kyle: "Brother, for your hospitality, I feel the need to say something; I may have been less than truthful about where I and my companions are from."

Abdul: "No shit. I was wondering if you'd admit it."

Kyle: “I’ll not say where I’m from just yet. But I had an idea. How would you like if I were to see if my country would offer you and your family assistance and asylum?”

Abdul: “Yes.”

Kyle: “Well, that was easy. And your business and your homeland?”

Abdul fairly guffawed at this, choking on cigarette smoke.

Abdul: “What business? What homeland? Both are gone. The Muslims and the Jews made sure of that.”

“Everyone’s fault but your people’s,” Kyle thought, but of course he didn’t say it.

Kyle: “Now on a less hopeful note; those things will be back. Not tonight. Maybe not tomorrow. But they will be back. My men and women can protect you. But we need better armaments.”

Abdul: “Say no more. Tomorrow I’ll drive two into town and you’ll get all you need.”

Kyle headed for the barn, entering and finding that the lower level was full of innumerable casks of wine, and of course someone had already opened one. A good deal of drinking was done for the next while, and then when most everyone was drunk, they somehow managed to climb into the loft of the barn, to the workers bunks. Once all were settled, Kyle stole back down to the floor of the barn with his wrist computer, which he used to dial Prometheus, whom he then had patch him through to Emmermann’s frequency. It took a while but eventually, Emmermann did answer the call.

Emmermann: “Someday Kyle, you’ll call me while I’m in the midst of copulating with a woman, and I’ll be very cross.”

Kyle: “Someday Sir. But not yet.”

Emmermann: “What do you need, Kyle? Are you on Mars?”

Kyle: “No, Sir. Lebanon. Tell me, do you own a winery? How much do they go for these days?”

Emmermann: “Can’t say I do. And they go for enough money that I’m not inclined to buy one without an explanation.”

Thus, Kyle explained what he knew. As one might have predicted, Emmermann was rather put out at the Medusas for not following protocol, which was to execute any who’d seen off-world technology. And yet, the prospect of owning a private winery intrigued him, and Abdul and his family were the ideal candidates for new colonists; they were a young family, hard working, well off, in good health, and racially acceptable. Emmermann, after much grumbling, agreed to send an interviewer in the next couple of days, who would lay out the family’s options. Their refusal would mean termination. It wasn’t ideal, but Kyle had a feeling they wouldn’t refuse.

Kyle and the others slept awhile, rising at first light. A number of the male Medusas, in particular Tsurabaya, were more than a bit hungover, but Fatima’s breakfast seemed an almost magical cure. After breakfast, Buchner stole back into the house, emerging with, of all things, a banjo, and played a song she’d written. It made Kyle feel slightly less alienated from Buchner, hearing her play music. Her song was the following.

Ya no estás más a mi lado, corazón,
En el alma sólo tengo soledad.
Y si ya no puedo verte,
¿Por qué Dios me hizo quererte
Para hacerme sufrir más?

Siempre fuiste la razón de mi existir,
Adorarte para mí fue religión.
En tus besos yo encontraba

El calor que me brindaba
El amor y la pasión.

Es la historia de un amor
Como no hay otro igual,
Que me hizo comprender
Todo el bien, todo el mal;
Que le dio luz a mi vida,
Apagándola después.
¡Ay, qué vida tan oscura!
Sin tu amor no viviré.

Siempre fuiste la razón de mi existir,
Adorarte para mí fue religión.
En tus besos yo encontraba
El calor que me brindaba
El amor y la pasión.

Es la historia de un amor
Como no hay otro igual,
Que me hizo comprender
Todo el bien, todo el mal;
Que le dio luz a mi vida,
Apagándola después.
¡Ay, qué vida tan oscura!
Sin tu amor no viviré.

After breakfast, as promised, Abdul took off in his truck along with two Medusas, to find weapons. Buchner and Tsurabaya were the ones chosen, as the main weaponry experts.

When Abdul had set off with Tsurabaya and Buchner, Kyle pulled Jack and a few of the others aside and told them of the

plan and the coming interviewers. Jack was rather put out that Kyle had proceeded with the plan without bringing him in beforehand, but he agreed that it was the best course of action going forward. None of the Medusas wanted to have to execute this family who had shown them such hospitality, not to mention that they wouldn't mind free wine supplied to The Glass Hub. No sooner had the conversation finished than Kyle received a message on his wrist computer.

"Daedalus-

Ready the family. Interviewers come in four hours.

-Zeus"

"Well. Guess we'd better follow the order," David said, "Kyle, go tell Fatima."

Kyle wasn't entirely sure he relished the assignment. But, as the only one who adequately spoke Fatima's native language, he felt it necessary that it should be him, and thus, he approached the house, and knocked on the door.

"Oh, Kyle," Fatima said upon answering the door, "did you need something?"

"Yes," Kyle said, "I'd like to talk to you. And your son, for that matter."

Fatima: "Is this about us leaving?"

Kyle: "I see your husband already proposed it to you. Yes, it is."

Fatima invited Kyle into the house, and for the next while he explained what he could, both to her and Michael. He left out any information about moving off planet; for one thing, he wasn't sure whether it was legal, and for another, he knew that it wouldn't be believed. He merely said that the family would be taken to "his country," wherever that might be, and to prepare for guests.

It wasn't long before Abdul returned, in his red pickup truck with the covered back. He, Tsurabaya, and Buchner deboarded, and flung open the truck's tailgate, revealing a wealth of guns and ammunition. Several Medusas fairly gaped at it.

"Don't mind if I do," Franz said, being the first to speak, approaching the truck and taking out a large caliber sniper rifle.

"Very good guns, but we've got work to do, Tsurabaya and I do," Buchner explained, "they sell by weight and condition. These things are all broken. They need a few minutes with a repair kit. The bullets are components, we'll have to load them ourselves."

"I have a reloader," Abdul volunteered.

"That's all very good," Kyle said, observing the unloading of the weapons and ammunition components, "but Abdul, I need you in your house. The rest of you get to work. Repair Franz's gun first so he can be on lookout."

Shrugs went up all around, and most of the Medusas began carrying the new weapons to the barn, with Abdul's direction to move aside one rack of casks, under which they'd find a trapdoor leading to the barn's basement, wherein they'd find the reloader and a workbench. Kyle and Jack, meanwhile, returned to the house with Abdul.

For the next little while, Kyle, Jack, and the family simply waited. Kyle wasn't entirely sure how the German colonial representatives would arrive until they did so in the most dramatic way possible. A pale blue spear of light appeared in the center of the family sitting room, to gasps from Abdul's and family. The spear then widened into an ovular portal, on the other end of which one could see was a typical colonial medical facility, with regen tanks and so on. Through the portal stepped a pair of SS women, one clutching a stack of papers, the other a small black briefcase.

“Oh my God,” Fatima gasped, the only family member able to speak.

“That’s the usual response,” one of the SS women, the one carrying the papers, said, “Herr Flynn? Herr Dellschau? I need you both to leave. Thank you.”

With a hopefully reassuring look at the stunned family, Kyle and Jack stepped out onto the porch. Here they waited for several hours, frequently surveying the landscape to spot any Deinonychoids, none of which appeared. Eventually, the door to the house opened, and young Michael came out.

“How’s it looking, Jundiun?” Max, who had come back to the porch, asked Michael, using the affectionate Arabic nickname he’d taken to using.

“They’ve given us 10 minutes to pack. I’m taking a last look,” Michael explained.

Kyle reentered the house, looking for Abdul and Fatima. He found them in their bedroom, looking rather flustered yet determined as they stuffed their suitcases.

“Where are they sending you?” Kyle asked.

“Somewhere called New Avignon,” Abdul said, “thank you, Kyle. But when you mentioned your country, you might have mentioned it was another planet!”

“Would you have believed me?” Kyle asked with his signature chuckle.

“Not for a fucking instant. But I’d have liked to know anyway,” Abdul said with a smile.

Kyle helped the family pack for the next few minutes, then went with them back to their living room, where the portal remained open, the two SS women having left. The medical facility beyond was now abuzz with activity.

“Any tips?” Fatima asked.

“Get a few feet clear of the portal before it closes,” Kyle advised.

“Wait, wait,” Abdul said, setting down his bag and rushing to another room, returning almost instantly with a large ring of keys, which he handed to Kyle.

“These are for you,” Abdul said, “the estate is yours for as long as you want it. It’s the least I can do, for saving the life of my son.”

“Thank you, Habibi,” Kyle said, a bit tearfully, “I will look you up when I get home.”

And with that, the family left, and the portal closed behind them in a brief flash of brilliant blue light. As he walked away, Kyle wondered what he meant by “home.” Surely he meant something more specific than just Der Bund as a whole.

Kyle returned to the porch, finding Max and Jack waiting. Kyle jangled the keys triumphantly, and thus returned his brain fully to mission mode.

Kyle: “Right. What’s the situation? How’s the ammo coming?”

Max: “It’s coming well. There’s been a single sighting. I told Franz to hold fire.”

Jack: “Good. Time to resume the operation. We need to capture one.”

Kyle: “I still don’t see how you think that’ll work.”

Jack: “It’ll work, dammit. I’ve done it before, the trick is sedation.”

Kyle: “And where do you plan to get this sedative exactly?”

Jack: “You’ll see.”

Kyle: “I fucking hate people who say that.”

Kyle, Jack, and Max returned to the barn, finding the basement opened, via a trapdoor in the floor as Abdul had said. Down the concrete stairs they descended, into what was now the Medusas makeshift workhouse and command center. Here,

bullets were being made at a near industrial level, with the guns already all repaired.

"Right then," Jack said briskly, "let's proceed with the plan."

"Which is what exactly?" someone demanded.

"I'm glad you asked," Jack said, "we're going to get one of those lizards hopelessly drunk."

"So, what? We invite one for a glass of wine?" Joshie asked sarcastically.

"Something like that," Jack said, not rising to the sarcasm. "Will someone fetch Franz and Klein?"

Franz and Klein were fetched from their perch on the roof of the barn. Meanwhile, Jack began taking various things from around the workbench and the many boxes which stood around the room. From among the items he gathered, the first was a slate and chalk, which he began illustrating on. Kyle looked and saw that he was drawing a rather detailed Deinonychoid, with diagram points. Franz and Klein arrived, and thus Jack turned to the group.

"Attention on deck!" Jack commanded, and when the order was followed, he gave the speech he'd been building towards.

Jack: "Alright motherfuckers. What is the one thing everyone knows about reptilians?"

Harune: "That they can't stand alcohol."

Jack: "Gold star!"

Harune: "I read your mind or we'd be here all day."

Jack: "I resent that. But you are right on the money. The trick, of course, is in administration."

With that, Jack turned to the little display he'd set up, grabbing from it a large syringe and needle.

Jack: "This is a syringe. Used for winemaking in some way, don't ask. A good dose of that stuff in the right place, one of

those lizzies will pass out. The trick is isolating one, and the first step is making so it can't call for help, no?"

Max: "If you say so."

Jack: "The shit I put up with. I am correct. And the agent of my correct theory is this."

From his pocket, Jack pulled a single large caliber rifle bullet, of the type usually loaded into a sniper rifle.

Kovac: "I thought we wanted to sedate it, not kill it."

Jack: "Precisely. Which is why I'm calling for a well-aimed shot, directly through the side of the neck, right here."

Using the bullet, Jack pointed to a spot on the illustration of the Deinonychoid. A specific spot about 1/3rd of the way down the creature's neck. This spot was labeled as "vocal cords."

"And with this spot shot through," Jack concluded, "One of us attacks. Inject the fucker full of alcohol, and drag it back here, plumb its mind, and haul ass to our next objective. Hades, can you make that shot?"

"Yes Sir, I can," Franz said, without any trace of sarcasm for once.

"Hold on," Hofnitz interjected for the first time, "all of this is assuming we can get one isolated enough to abduct in the first place."

"We can," Klein cut in, "they prefer to shit out of sight. Fucking disgusting to witness. They dig shitholes and-"

"Thank you," Kyle cut in, "we'll use that."

"I can jump you into position for the injection," Harune volunteered.

"And I'll do the injection. At least I know how to use a needle," Hofnitz said.

Shrugs went up all around and everyone began taking their positions. Kyle positioned himself atop the barn alongside Franz and Klein, with his own binoculars. Klein indicated an area at

the edge of the vineyard, in some light woods, where indeed latrines had been dug by the Deinonychoids. There was likely to be a wait before a Deinonychoid needed to relieve themself, and so Kyle decided to take the opportunity to teach a lesson.

Kyle: "So tell me boys; why are they here? And why are we fighting them?"

Klein: "Sir, isn't that the point of this interrogation?"

Kyle: "No it is not. The point of this interrogation is to assess the positioning and strategy of the enemy. Now tell me, Franz and Klein; why are they here?"

A long pause.

Franz: "They're after bodies. Territory. They want this land because it has a significance."

Klein: "And they're unstoppable. They'll not be reasoned with."

Kyle couldn't help but fairly guffaw at these assessments.

Klein: "What's so funny, Sir?"

Kyle: "Just that everything you both said is completely wrong. You're good shots, but you're shit analysts. These guys aren't here for any conquest. They're here by some sort of accident. They attack on sight because that's what was done to them first. So boys; take this as a lesson."

Klein: "Well, speaking of shit; here comes one of the beasts."

With this news, Kyle sent up a telepathic call to Harune and Hofnitz, both of whom hurried onto the barn roof. Franz readied and aimed his sniper rifle, and Kyle crowded close to observe what Franz observed, through his own binoculars. Franz held till the creature had finished relieving itself and buried the remains, which Kyle was grateful for, then angled and took the shot. For an excruciating moment, one couldn't see much, as the Deinonychoid had ducked behind a bush on being shot. But

almost instantly, it reemerged, clawing at the hole through its neck, unable to call out.

“Holy shit. I don’t know if I could’ve made that shot,” Kyle muttered to himself, then to the group said, “Demeter, take my hand! Icarus, jump us!”

Kyle and Hofnitz scrambled to their feet, taking each other’s hands, and instantly, they were transported next to the flailing Deinonychoid. Kyle stepped into a kick to the beast’s side, knocking it down. Kyle pounced then, holding down the Deinonychoid’s arms and head.

“Now! And watch the legs and tail!” Kyle ordered.

Hofnitz, holding the syringe full of alcohol, moved quickly, injecting directly into a vein running near the eye. Within seconds, the Deinonychoid relaxed, then seemed to slip into near unconsciousness. Kyle held up his hand in a signal to the others, and in an instant, himself, Hofnitz, and the Deinonychoid, a large male with red spots, were jumped into the basement of the barn, with the remaining Medusas.

“God it stinks,” Tsurabaya muttered, approaching with a rope in order to muzzle and truss the Deinonychoid.

“We won’t have to put up with it long,” Jack said, “soon as we get info from this one, we load out. We’ve been in position too long.”

“I’d advise against,” Kyle cut in, “it’s nighttime and most of us are tired. We hole up in the house and wait. The lizards find their friend's body and then we follow them on foot to their base.”

“There’s a flaw. What if they find the house?” Max asked pointedly.

“They won’t,” Harune said, already kneeling and interfacing with the Deinonychoid, “this one is broadcasting. They’re all very confused. They’re scared of us too. Agreeing to not attack

first. They're laying an ambush two mountains north of us. They have stockpiles there."

"Fuck that," Kyle said, beginning to strategize, "we go right for the gate."

"And wait there. We ambush them!" David finished.

"Yes. Surround the gate, and when they come back, we strike. After we've found where it leads," Kyle said.

"I don't think we're getting much more from this one. It's mostly struggling to breathe through the hole in its neck," Harune concluded.

With this conclusion, Jack approached the Deinonychoid.

"I'm sorry," Jack said, before dispatching the Deinonychoid with a devastating shot to the head from a sawn off shotgun.

"Icarus, do you think you can find the gate?" Joshie asked, visibly nauseated by the sight of the Deinonychoid.

"I think I saw it. It's underground in the valley," Harune said.

"The Jews are digging bunkers in that area, Abdul says," Tsurabaya contributed, "I suppose that's why they've had difficulty returning to the gate."

"Doesn't matter," Jack decided, "we head out after a day of rest."

And so it was. The Medusas rested for a day in the house, which was thankfully quite well stocked, then they packed into Abdul's pair of trucks, and set out. Kyle drove one truck, with Joshie and someone else in the cab with him, and after a few minutes, Joshie turned on the radio. The radio station played vintage French and American tunes, and one of the first which came on was the following.

Well, it's been building up inside of me
For I don't know how long,
I don't know why, but

I keep thinking something's bound to go wrong.

But she looks in my eyes
And makes me realize,
And she says,

"Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Everything will turn out alright."

I guess I should've kept my mouth shut
When I started to brag about my car,
But I can't back down now
'Cause I pushed the other guys too far.

She makes me come alive
And makes me wanna drive
When she says,

"Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Everything will turn out alright."

She told me,
"Baby, when you race today,
Just take out all my love with you.
And if you knew how much I loved you,
Then baby, nothing could go wrong with you."

Oh, what she does to me

When she makes love to me,
When she says,

"Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Don't worry, baby.
Everything will turn out alright."

Kyle happened to see Joshie looking slightly teary eyed.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked, his compassion genuine.

"I wrote that song less than a month ago. You never get used to hearing them," Joshie said.

"Who's the girl?" Kyle asked.

"Nobody important," Joshie said, then glanced into the bed of the truck behind him, and Kyle willfully didn't follow Joshie's gaze.

It wasn't long before the Medusas encountered a checkpoint. They drove side by side on the approach to said checkpoint, of one mind prepared for the inevitable, their guns concealed and within grasp.

"Wait until enough are within sight," was the telepathic order Kyle sent up to all the Medusas before the trucks stopped.

It was over in minutes. The soldiers of the tiny checkpoint, which flew a flag of some unknown militia of Arab origin, judging by the language spoken, all stepped out to surround the trucks, and were mowed down almost instantly. Only a few of the very young Arab soldiers drew weapons, and not a single Medusa took a bullet. The unfairness of it made Kyle feel momentarily sick, but of course the group pressed on, stopping only to raid the tiny checkpoint, taking a few boxes of grenades, something they'd been sorely missing. This execution completed, the Medusas continued on. They made it to their

destination unmolested, though they spotted many other soldiers along the way, and one bullet-hole-riddled corpse of a Deinonychoid, indicating that their theory might have been correct.

Perhaps an hour of driving through the mountains later, the Medusas reached the gate. To everyone's surprise, including Harune's for once, the gate had migrated above ground. It stood quite out in the open, in a wide valley. No one, human or Deinonychoid, seemed to be anywhere near it.

"What do we do?" someone asked. A long pause followed.

"We send out our coordinates," Jack said at last, "and we go through. Daedalus, do you agree?"

"Don't see much other choice. Everyone reload," Kyle said, switching on his wrist computer and inputting the Medusas coordinates, sending them first to Camp Hero, then to Prometheus, and then on a whim to Georg.

"Guard formation, ladies," Kyle ordered, and the team obeyed, falling into a circle which covered all possible angles of attack, and in this formation, they entered the gate.

The Medusas emerged, to their surprise, in a monstrous concrete room, facing a much larger gate. On one wall was a large Arabic sign, faded but still readable.

"Welcome to Baalbek," Kyle read, "where have I heard that name before?"

"I've been here!" Franz exclaimed, "From Cheyenne Mountain!"

Kyle's mind flashed back to the Stargate maps he'd studied during his brief time at Cheyenne Mountain, and remembered seeing the name of Baalbek on it. They were still in southeast Lebanon, Kyle realized. The large gate must somehow be connected to the smaller one, the Deinonychoids having come through the larger one first.

“Where do we go? Through the gate?” asked Kovac.

“Everyone turn around!” Harune snapped, sounding panicked, and everyone obeyed.

Upon turning, the Medusas were faced with a large blue metal door, of the roll up variety, painted with a Star of David in a darker blue, which began rolling up. Behind it stood a small battalion of soldiers, all in black combat gear, standing around black boxes, and all raising energy rifles and plasma rail pistols, readying for attack. The Medusas had split seconds to react, and did so as they had been trained.

Within an instant, there was an explosion in almost midair, taking out two of the enemy combatants. This distracted the enemy long enough for the Medusas to think of a flash strategy. In the moment, none had time to think of what had caused this little explosion, but in retrospect, it’s likely that Harune “jumped” a grenade into position to cause it.

“Charge! Charge! Charge! Fucking charge!” Kyle screamed, knowing that their conventional guns would be fairly useless against enhanced soldiers in armor. And so the Medusas charged, while firing, more to distract than anything.

Kyle charged first at a female soldier with a plasma rail pistol who’d targeted him. This soldier had a red robotic eye, no doubt a sniper’s eye, but Kyle was designed to survive this. His body snapped into position so that the projectiles just missed him, dodging at the exact, perfectly calculated instant at which the soldier pulled the trigger, effectively dodging bullets. On the soldier’s fourth shot, Kyle had a flash of inspiration and used his telekinesis to bend the soldier’s arm upward into the suicide position, right at the instant she pulled the trigger, causing her to blow her own head off with the rail pistol at point blank range, at which point Kyle dove towards the gun.

As Kyle dove, he was grabbed from behind by two male enhanced soldiers. Kyle reflexively snapped into hand-to-hand combat, twisting into a punch which knocked one soldier back, allowing Kyle to reach for his knife as he back kicked the other soldier away, only to realize his knife was missing.

"Icarus! Blade!" Kyle called out, holding out his hand, knowing that Harune would understand.

Harune did understand, and in an instant, the handle of one of the collapsible plasma-edged Arasaka katanas appeared in his hand, and in a flash, Kyle had extended the blade, and then almost as quickly cut down both the soldiers attacking him, one of them split in half lengthwise. He then turned and grabbed the pistol he'd been moving toward, taking out any of the soldiers he could safely shoot without the projectile injuring one of his comrades. There weren't many of these, and so re-extending the blade, he charged into the combat.

After cutting down a few more enhanced soldiers and dodging more shots, Kyle spotted Buchner in a hand to hand fight with a combatant. Buchner, as one of the less enhanced Medusas, was losing, and so Kyle rushed forward, ripping the soldier away from Buchner, and into the path of his blade, killing the soldier.

"Headshots only, don't kill your friends," Kyle said tersely, tossing the pistol he'd grabbed to Buchner.

At one point after this, Kyle was rushing forward, his blade extended, when he was stopped by a telekinetic pulse. He resisted, but even with Kyle's strength, all he could do was stand still rather than be blown back, staring face to face with a tall male soldier, holding him still without lifting a finger. But Kyle returned the smirk on the soldier's face when a grenade rolled between the soldier's feet, exploding and taking out the soldier. Kyle looked and saw that the grenade had come from Joshie,

who raised his gun at Kyle, who ducked quickly, allowing Joshie to take out a soldier who was charging behind Kyle.

"Thanks a lot!" Kyle called out.

"Don't mention it Sir!" Joshie called cheerfully, and returned to shooting as Kyle turned to parkour run up the wall, soaring over the carnage for a short distance in order to cut down three soldiers who were mobbing Max.

The Medusas, of course, had not counted on a run in with enhanced (Israeli, judging by their iconography and Hebrew swearing) soldiers, but it was what they were ultimately built for. All the Medusas survived the encounter, albeit rather bruised, and the enemy soldiers didn't take it lying down. At the end, one final enhanced soldier charged, but was gunned down coldly by three gun wielding Medusas.

"You don't fuck with Medusas," Max said, then immediately turned pink at his own corniness.

"Nowhere to go but up," Kyle said, stepping towards the large gate.

"You all have wounds. Shouldn't I tend to those before we go?" Hofnitz asked pointedly. Her words were ended by the sound of an alarm beginning to blare.

"We go through! Tend on the other side," Jack ordered.

"I'm not leaving these guns," Buchner said decisively, rushing to the room from which the enemy soldiers had emerged.

Kyle gave the order, and everyone who was able grabbed a rifle and a pistol, and as many charge packs as possible. Their old, conventional guns they threw in a pile, and as they left, someone threw a grenade into this pile, destroying the guns.

The Medusas emerged from the large gate in battle formation, guns raised. They fully expected to find either more Israelis or a nest of Deinonychoids on Mars. Instead, they emerged in what could only be described as; "paradise."

The portal exited at the edge of some woods, overlooking a verdant and lush meadow dotted with technicolor patches of tiny wildflowers. A pale orange sun shone in the cloudless and colorless sky, and in the distance one could make out green peaks of innumerable mountains. The entire environment had a nearly invisible yet unmissable glow of an ethereal nature. A moment into staring later, one realized that the ground curved inward rather than outward.

"Are we inside a Dyson sphere?" Kovac asked, after this realization.

"No," David said, "I do believe we're inside the Earth. That is where the Baalbek portal leads."

Most of the Medusas knew about the Earth's status as a hollow sphere with an environment on the inside. David, however, seemed to be the only one who had ever been to this place, or know beyond the very basics of what to expect.

"Can we set up camp without being eaten, Icarus?" someone asked, and Harune dutifully closed his eyes, scanning the environment via nonlinear sight.

"No danger detected," Harune said after a moment.

"Good enough for me," Jack said, and led the group into the woods to set up camp.

For the next while, things calmed. Everyone sat around in their makeshift encampment, and Hofnitz took to tending the wounds of the Medusas, of which there were many after the previous engagement. It filled Kyle and Jack with a determination; that the Medusas must have armor. It was obvious that Emmermann would not supply it, given his earlier attitude towards assisting with weapons supply, but it must be acquired somehow. Tsurabaya, as the black market man, was approached, and he agreed to do what he could. As usual, it wasn't asked what this meant.

In spite of himself, Kyle also gained a touch of respect for Hofnitz. A cold-hearted bitch she might be, but Kyle had to admit that she was a very competent medic, expertly stitching and cauterizing wounds with the little kits in the pockets of her cargo jacket.

Once all were bandaged, a need was realized for water, and a little search went out, with a brook and several lagoons located. It was Harune who first tasted the water, and the smile that spread across his face was such that even those who weren't thirsty bent to lap up the water. The water was completely pure and refreshing, and sweet like honey, with a vaguely spiritual seeming quality. Kyle thought that the water here must be something other than pure H2O. With everyone refreshed, they returned to camp, beginning to discuss sources of dinner.

As time passed, everyone began splitting off into their usual little groups, and Kyle wound up with Tsurabaya and Buchner, analyzing the new guns. These guns, while used by Israelis, were determined to be of German colonial origin, and as they became the Medusas' new primary weapons for a time, a description is merited.

The rifle was a black affair, of the plasma railgun variety, about three feet long from end to end, with a battery charge pack inserted at the usual point where a standard magazine would be inserted. The charge pack held 180 shots.

The handguns were also black, and bore resemblance in both size and shape to a Desert Eagle, though of course the Desert Eagle did not exist at the time. The charge packs were once again inserted at the point at which one would insert a standard magazine, but these were longer, bending at the bottom and extending along the length of the barrel, creating a sort of chainsaw handle grip when the gun was loaded. The pistol

charge packs held 120 shots each. Unlike the rifles, the pistols had no select fire function.

The next shift in status quo came a number of hours into this almost bucolic episode. Kyle was standing away from the group a ways, cheerfully relieving himself against a tree, and contemplating the beauty around him as he did so, when he heard the snap of a twig and the telepathic message of; "I don't want to hurt you."

In an instant, Kyle grabbed his pistol from where it sat on the tree in front of him and spun around, but the Deinonychoid, a larger than usual specimen with black patterning down his back, was prepared. In a flash, he had leapt at least 15 feet so that it stood in front of Kyle, and delivered a swipe of his tail that sent Kyle's gun flying in one direction, and an angled kick to Kyle's body which knocked Kyle himself in another direction altogether. But Kyle wasn't cut; the Deinonychoid's kick was clawless, seemingly on purpose.

"I said, I don't want to hurt you," the Deinonychoid repeated telepathically.

"You pretty good with those claws?" Kyle asked in telepathic reply, realizing that this Deinonychoid seemed to be enhanced, and thus given his much larger size, would easily kill Kyle should he fight one on one.

"I'm very good with my claws. You may recover your decency," the Deinonychoid projected with a slight glance at Kyle's crotch.

Feeling rather sheepish, though of course not showing it, Kyle stood quickly and closed up his pants, then faced the Deinonychoid, making eye contact to increase the telepathic intensity of their conversation.

Kyle: "Alright, you don't want to hurt me. I think I believe you. What do you want?"

Deinonychoid: “You topsiders are all so to the point. It’s almost refreshing. I and a few others have been watching since your group arrived. We think you can help us.”

Kyle felt a slight shiver at this, realizing that the Deinonychoids had been tracking the Medusas for hours, even evading psionic detection.

Kyle: “Help you do what? Invade the surface?”

Kyle hadn’t for a moment believed this was the Deinonychoids purpose for being on the surface; it didn’t ring true.

“Dad, are you alright?” Max’s voice called out, cutting into the exchange. “I heard something crashing.”

“I’m fine Kid,” Kyle called back, “don’t come, I’m naked.”

It was a weak excuse, Kyle realized. Had it been true, it would’ve been nothing Max hadn’t seen at least a thousand times.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen at least a thousand times,” Max called back dismissively, and a few seconds later, emerged in the little clearing with Kyle and the Deinonychoid.

“Oh shit!” Max exclaimed, and began pulling out his gun.

“Don’t shoot! That’s an order!” Kyle said, stepping in between Max and the Deinonychoid.

“What the fuck is going on Dad?” Max demanded, not firing but not releasing his gun.

“My new friend here was just explaining,” Kyle said in forced calmness.

And so the Deinonychoid did. He explained that while he himself was a soldier, as were the others observing the Medusas, most of the ones who’d gone through the gate were scientists and students, though obviously able to defend themselves. He further explained that he and the local Deinonychoid community had enjoyed good relations with the “Topsiders” who oversaw the large gate, making occasional trips through. Thus,

when their equipment had detected a new gate splitting off the large one, as occasionally happened, they'd gone through, only to have hostile encounters with the new "Topsiders," who'd occupied the base, driving the Deinonychoids to rush into the countryside, where the Medusas had been called to encounter them.

This didn't answer a few questions, such as why there were quite so many Deinonychoids and, where they'd gotten ahold of the plasma rifles they'd used. But for the moment, Kyle considered it a feasible explanation, and thought that this soldier Deinonychoid's goal of reuniting with his people and returning them to Hollow Earth was the best goal, if only to avoid an all out war. Thus, Kyle made the executive decision to lead the military Deinonychoid back to the base, and begin the return operation. As they walked, Kyle scolded Max.

"Max," Kyle said, "next time I tell you not to come near because I'm naked, listen to what I say. It either means I'm fucking a woman or doing something behind your back."

"Clearly," Max spat, "I don't like this Dad. A few hours ago, they were our enemies."

"Precisely," Kyle said, and then didn't explain as he and Max neared the campsite, instead running ahead.

"Ladies and gents," Kyle said in his commanding voice, "I'm going to ask you all to please not shit yourselves and to holster or otherwise make safe your weapons."

And before anyone could obey or ask any further questions, Max and the Deinonychoid emerged. Kyle's order was obeyed, though the Medusas did scramble to their feet, and their weapons were in easy reach. And thus, Kyle and Max explained the situation and the plan they were formulating.

A few minutes into the explanation, the four other military Deinonychoids emerged from the forest, called by the one who

had approached Kyle. There were four males and one female. As their names were impossible to pronounce for a human tongue, they agreed to receive human names. Cheng took up the task, and thus dubbed the Deinonychoids as; Randy, Eddy, Larry, Tina, and Billy Bob.

"Suit up," Jack ordered at last, "we move out in 20."

Thus, everyone began the process of "suiting up," by putting on their jackets, loading their guns, hydrating, etcetera. Randy, Eddy, Larry, Tina, and Billy Bob wished to return to a cave nearby to retrieve their own equipment.

"I'm not buying that," Max said, pulling Kyle aside, "With your permission Daedalus, I'd like to take Icarus and supervise."

"You have my blessing," Kyle said with a mix of pride and amusement, wondering just what Max thought he'd accomplish if his suspicions were correct. He let it pass however because there was one trait he tried to instill in all those he trained; a tendency to question one's orders.

Max and Harune left with the Deinonychoids, returning a short while later, none looking any the worse for wear. The Deinonychoids returned carrying the large silver plasma rifles their compatriots had carried on the surface, and at last departure happened.

"I just wish they smelled better," Tsurabaya muttered.

"Quit being such a Jap," Harune advised him.

In battle formation, the Medusas and the five Deinonychoids exited the large gate. To their surprise, they found the gate room of the Baalbek base empty and sealed off, with the smaller split gate also undisturbed.

"There's an ambush on the other side," Harune said flatly.

"No shit," was Kovac's contribution, which was followed by a pause.

“Apollo,” Jack said at last, “describe the architecture of the base.”

“Well,” David said, “it’s a lot like a smaller Cheyenne Mountain. 12 levels.”

“I like our chances better there than in an open field,” Jack said, “do you agree, Daedalus?”

Kyle simply shrugged and nodded. In truth, he didn’t like the situation either way, but he slightly preferred familiar seeming hallways to an open field, where they’d be sitting ducks.

“Apollo, you’re in front. Icarus, scan every inch of this base,” Kyle instructed.

“Aye Sir,” David said, moving to the front of the battalion looking rather daunted, while Harune closed his eyes to begin his scan.

“They’re in offices,” Harune said, “most of them anyway. There’s an armory five levels up that we can go for I think.”

“What do you mean by most of them?” Kyle asked.

“There’s four guards on each level,” Harune explained.

“The doors have retinal scanners,” Buchner pointed out, “how do we get up?”

“Very simple,” Franz said, walking over to one of the fireproof doors of the gate room and standing in front of the retinal scanner. The door opened.

“They never removed us from the system,” Franz said triumphantly.

Kyle looked somewhat disapprovingly at Franz. The boy had balls, but one questioned whether he should have thought with them in this instance. But perhaps it was for the best, as no alarms went off, and judging by the concrete stairs beyond the door, the upper levels were now accessible.

“Right,” David said, taking charge as instructed, “up we go. Hug the left wall and watch your backs.”

As if on cue, two personnel appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Both were enhanced, but both were gunned down before having a chance to reach the Medusas. And so, with David in the lead, they processed. Whilst crouched in one hallway, Kyle struck up a conversation with one particular Deinonychoid, the one with the long, wide red stripe, whom Cheng had named Billy Bob.

Kyle: "So Billy Bob, how'd you and your friends get these enhancements? And these guns?"

Billy Bob: "You are German, yes?"

Kyle: "Proudly."

Billy Bob: "There was a time not so long ago when your people were a more common sight."

Kyle: "Did you fight for them?"

Billy Bob: "I'm waiting to be activated. Maybe that's what's happening now."

Another time loop. Perhaps this was the cause of the Project Phoenix mission in the first place, Kyle thought. Surely the entire thing couldn't be purely explained by the fact that a few Deinonychoids had put in an appearance in this backwater country.

In this fashion, the Medusas and their five allies swept the base. The pairs of enhanced guards they met, while surely ferocious, were no match for the Medusas and their guns and blades, and the Deinonychoids with their own guns and their bodies, who quite possibly could have taken the base alone.

"Sweet Jesus," Joshie muttered, upon seeing the black spotted Deinonychoid called Eddy bite off and consume the head of one guard.

Eventually, the Medusas and their allies reached the armory. From it, they liberated many charge packs, as well as several grenade launchers, which they then used to destroy the armory.

The explosion was such that they momentarily worried about the structural integrity of the base, but the Uberconcrete structure held.

Eventually, the group reached the vehicle bay, much like the one housed in Cheyenne Mountain, and here they commandeered three trucks. The trucks emerged from a portal, within view of the magnificent ruins of Baalbek, but tucked just so that the tourists couldn't see it.

Before long, the trucks reached the spot where the Deinonychoids had holed up (both literally and figuratively) not far from Abdul's farm, and the survivors were gathered, then returned without a hitch.

"Watch your backs," Kyle advised, "you don't know when the Israelis will retake the gate, nor if they'll invade your land."

"Thank you, Kyle." Billy Bob said. And through the portals the Deinonychoids went.

"Right," Jack said at last once the Medusas were above ground, "I'll call Jimmy. Let him know we're done."

"Can we go home now?" Kyle asked.

"Where else would we go?" Max asked with an inquisitive smile.

"I mean our real home. Back to Mars," Kyle explained. "I need my dick sucked. And to breathe air that doesn't smell of dried blood, gun smoke, and fear."

Almost unconsciously, Kyle patted his pocket, where he held two keys; the key to The Eagle's Claw, and the key to the winery estate he'd inherited from Abdul. He wondered if he'd ever return to the latter.

Author's note: I hope the reader has enjoyed this more action focused chapter, and its twist, as unexpected to the reader as it was in real life.

Chapter 6

As it happened, the Medusas did return to Mars after Lebanon, after a trip through Camp Hero to pick up Prometheus, and thus Kyle immediately went to have his two wishes fulfilled, after a shower. With his first wish carried out, quite expertly, by one of the ladies of The Glass Hub, Kyle set off for his altar in the woods. Here he sat, communing for several hours, and feeding the little dinosaurs by hand. He returned to The Eagle's Claw near sunset. Much as he might prefer to, Kyle couldn't spend every night on Mars naked in the forest.

Kyle returned to The Eagle's Claw, finding Jack missing.

"He's looking for you," someone explained, "head back to the club."

"And he couldn't have just messaged me?" Kyle thought irritably, once again setting towards Prometheus's shuttle.

Kyle reentered The Glass Hub, where the ladies were now setting up to open, including the one who had serviced Kyle earlier, a curvaceous blonde of course, German with the name Elisabet.

"Couldn't get enough?" Elisabet asked, seeing Kyle reenter and begin searching the bar.

"Keep your mouth shut. I'm tempted when I see it open," Kyle said flirtatiously, then switched to business; "Where's Jack?"

"He went into the big cubicle with Camille," Elisabet explained.

Kyle thus went to "the big cubicle," as those who frequented The Glass Hub called it. This cubicle was considerably larger

than the normal sitting booths and cubicles containing twin beds, this one containing a full size bed, a television, and minibar, for The Glass Hub's clients who were more inclined and able to afford a spot of luxury with their chosen ladies. Kyle entered the cubicle, finding Jack was indeed seated on the bed and talking to Camille Lambert.

"About time you showed up, asshole," Jack said in genuine irritation.

"It's called a computer message, cunt," Kyle said, then on turning his attention to Camille continued; "What's the story Aphrodite?"

From her blouse pocket, Camille took a small notebook.

Camille: "I've gotten some information from some of the girls, as you asked."

Kyle: "Is it good?"

Camille: "I do believe so."

And with that, Camille relayed the information to Kyle and Jack. The purpose of The Glass Hub as a spy center for Mars was shaping up quite well indeed, and Camille had proven to be quite skilled at training the ladies, having taught them to "talk shop" with The Glass Hub's clients, thus making the process of gaining compromising information simpler, in some cases. Among the information relayed, the group learned of a laboratory studying abducted Ant People under the purview of the Coronado Family, the piracy empire of Mars run by the notorious Wang Yu Nong, and rumors that the infamous Black Crows unit hadn't been disbanded.

Jack: "What about armor? We need armor."

Camille: "Then I suggest you go to this Wang Yu Nong. I have my own request."

Kyle: "Anything. Within reason."

Camille: “I want my girls to be taught how to defend themselves. Not from individual men, but from attacks. There were raids on two settlements while you were gone.”

Kyle: “Done.”

A bit more chatting was done about this and that, including Wang Yu Nong’s location, and Kyle and Jack exited the big cubicle, giving Camille some nominal sum to cover the time spent. The men exited to find The Glass Hub had opened in their absence, though it was hardly filled to capacity yet. Max was among the first customers, and had already chosen a girl.

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Kyle thought as he walked past the pair on his way to the bar for his usual Corelian Sour.

The evening passed mostly in the usual way, with the usual drinks and debauchery. At one point, Camille took to the stage and sang an affecting rendition of La Vie en Rose, and at one point, she tapped Kyle’s shoulder, pointing him in the direction of a stocky Chinese man in a black leather flight jacket with a silver dragon embroidered onto the back.

“That’s Wang Yu Nong, going by Gerda’s description,” Camille explained.

Kyle waved Jack and Tsurabaya, the self-professed master of black marketeering, over to where he stood, and the three approached Wang Yu Nong. Without waiting for an invitation, Tsurabaya pulled out a chair opposite Wang Yu Nong and sat. Wang made only a passing glance at Tsurabaya, then took one long, slow sip of his champagne, then turned over his attention.

“Did I say you could sit there?” Wang Yu Nong asked, as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

“No, I did,” Kyle said.

“Did you? What affords you that right?” Wang asked.

“My big friend here owns this joint, along with me,” Kyle said, gesturing at Jack. “And the nice Japanese gent here is our friend, and we say he can sit wherever he damn well wants.”

“Your Mandarin is impeccable,” Wang said, “and I’m betting this is not so much an attempt to annoy me as it is a business meeting.”

“Yes,” Kyle said, “and please speak German or English for my friends here.”

“What do you need?” Wang asked. Another long sip of champagne.

“We need armor. Good armor. It’s not easy to come by,” Tsurabaya explained.

“No it is not,” Wang said, “in fact it’s so rare that I’ll only trade it for another object of greater value. How many suits do you need?”

“Twelve,” Jack explained, “eight for men, four for women.”

This earned a low whistle from Wang.

“Well,” Wang said, “have you ever seen or heard of a spider sword?”

“No,” Jack said, “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“What the fuck is a spider sword?” Kyle asked.

“It’s a sword carved from the husk of a queen spider,” Jack explained, “they’re impossible to find.”

“Fine,” Kyle said, “we’ll bring you your spider sword, in exchange for you getting us our armor, and if you promise to sell the sword to Admiral Emmermann. You know who that is, I’m sure.”

“There are other fences on Mars, Daedalus,” Tsurabaya said.

“Not this useful,” Kyle said, “we’ll manage the assignment. Pleasure doing business, Mr. Wang. You drink and fuck for free, tonight only.”

Wang Yu Nong smiled an impish smile, then stood, walking towards the bar without another word, leaving Kyle, Jack, and Tsurabaya alone at the table, where they all sat.

"You have no idea what you're doing," Jack said, "I grew up here, and I've only ever seen one of those swords once."

"Then our benefactor will be glad to have one," Kyle said, "and more likely to have a moment of generosity."

"You're one calculating bastard, you know that?" Tsurabaya laughed.

"And an idiot to boot," Jack added, not laughing at all.

"I get no respect around here," Kyle chuckled, "the plan will work. Where would one of these swords be?"

"With the tribe that made it. Or a holy site," Jack said, "and good luck getting either to admit it. I need a goddamn drink."

"He'll get over himself," Tsurabaya said once Jack had left, "and I'm going to call it a night."

"Yeah, fuck off, no one wants you around," Kyle said with a grin. With a laugh, Tsurabaya left. Kyle remained in The Glass Hub for a short while, observing, then he also left, returning to The Eagle's Claw for a night's rest.

Over breakfast the next morning, Tsurabaya chose to inform the remaining Medusas of the upcoming plan. Kyle and Jack hadn't officially decided to make this information known, but it proved fairly useful. Buchner raised her hand at the end of the conversation.

Kyle: "Spit it the fuck out, tomorrow doesn't exist."

Buchner: "I think I know where to find one of those things. The Russians have one. If the base is still there."

Jack: "Did you actually see it?"

Buchner: "I tested it. This was in about 1981."

Tsurabaya: "And where is the base? How do we get in?"

Buchner: “It’s in a cave system in the Isidis Planitia region. I think I can find it again.”

“That settles it,” Jack said, “Daedalus, Atalanta, Perseus, Icarus, get ready. We’re leaving in four hours.”

“You sure are excited about this all of a sudden,” Tsurabaya said suspiciously, to no response of course.

The little group of five readied, getting their overnight packs, loading their guns, packing away a few emergency foodstuffs, all the usual procedures. After this, at Jack’s insistence, all the participants of the op uploaded a preliminary report via their wrist computers, which they then uploaded into The Eagle’s Claw’s home AI. Prometheus’s shuttle was packed, and the little crew of Kyle, Jack, Tsurabaya, Buchner, and Harune set out, Harune flying the shuttle to Isidis Planitia while the others conferred.

Jack: “Alright. What are we looking for here?”

Buchner: “The base, if they didn’t fill it in, is somewhere in the basin. There’s a flat spot down there where you can land. The front door is in a cave by that landing area.”

Kyle: “How did we not know about this place during our scan?”

Buchner: “Maybe you’re almost as dumb as you look.”

Jack: “That’s enough of that shit, thank you. That’s no way to address your commander, as you ought to know. Now; how many strong are we looking at?”

Buchner shrugged.

Buchner: “The place had the capacity for about 300 in my day, but it was at no more than a third of that. Assuming they haven’t expanded.”

“We’re over the basin now,” Harune cut in after a bit, “and I see a flat spot. Set her down?”

“No,” Kyle said, standing to move to the front of the shuttle, “we survey the area first. Point her nose down. Prometheus, do a subterranean radar scan.”

“Yes, Captain,” Prometheus said.

With the order, Prometheus began her scan, via whatever systems were housed on board the shuttle. As she scanned, she transmitted the results into Kyle’s head.

“Prometheus, do you need maintenance? The image is fucking up,” Kyle said aloud after a moment.

“No, Captain. All my systems are in order. I can’t seem to make out much of the underground,” Prometheus replied.

“Pull up what you can and freeze frame,” Kyle instructed.

“They must have some kind of electromagnetic shielding lining the base,” Jack said, “blocks radar and nonlinear sight.”

“I don’t think I can jump it, either,” Harune volunteered.

As the others discussed the situation, Prometheus was following Kyle’s order. In a few moments, she had pulled up the clearest image she could manage of the underground, and Kyle could see it. There wasn’t very much visible; just a long shaft leading down to a few broken bits of hallways which Prometheus could detect.

“Daedalus, I don’t like just holding position here,” Harune cut in.

“Nor do I,” Kyle said, “Icarus, do a slow flyby of the area. Prometheus, continue your scanning.”

“What are you thinking?” Tsurabaya asked.

“I’m thinking that we shouldn’t walk through the front door into a blind position. And I’m also thinking that this is a military base. There must be another entrance somewhere; an air vent, a service tunnel, a missile silo, or anything less obvious than what we already know,” Kyle explained.

“I’ve heard worse plans,” Jack shrugged.

“Including most of the ones you come up with,” Kyle said dryly.

Harune began his ordered flyby, and Prometheus began her ordered scan, both kept within about three miles of the main entrance. They found what they were looking for not too much later, when Prometheus’s scan revealed a tunnel coming off a small beach of a small lake.

“Icarus, swing right, 2:00 o’clock, and Prometheus, magnify the end of that tunnel,” Kyle instructed.

These orders were followed, and sure enough, the entrance which the group had sought was accessible, though sealed by a grate. The faded but still readable Russian sign on the grate proved that this was indeed what the group wanted.

“Alright,” Kyle said approvingly, “Land the shuttle on that beach Icarus. There’s our entrance.”

Harune landed the shuttle, and after a final routine panoramic scan of the landing area, during which no threats were registered, the group alighted. Afterward, they surveyed their probable entrance, which was a large thick grate into a dark tunnel, about 12 feet in diameter. A sign was tacked onto the grate, which had no visible method of being opened or removed.

“What is it?” Harune asked.

“It’s a storm and wastewater drain,” Buchner explained.

Cautiously, Kyle approached, switching on the clip-on flashlight on the front of his fatigues, allowing him to peer into the tunnel.

“Looks like an old rusty pipe. This might just work,” Kyle said, “blow away the grate.”

Tsurabaya raised the sonic bazooka up to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. As expected, the sonic boom shattered the grate like glass, allowing easy access to the pipe.

“Alright,” Jack said once a few moments had passed without incident, “we go in. Stay close and watch your footing. You don’t know what might have made a nest in there.”

With their guns in hand, and swords and knives within easy reach, Kyle, Jack, Tsurabaya, Buchner, and Harune entered the pipe. The pipe was very dry and had no particular scent beyond rust, indicating that it likely hadn’t served its purpose in some years, which was both reassuring and somewhat worrying. On the one hand, it made it less likely that the place was in much use; on the other, it made it more likely that the base had been emptied out, and the spider sword taken away. The group followed the pipe a long ways, eventually finding a ladder which led up a vertical pipe to hatch.

“It’s a service hatch,” Jack said, “there’s our way in.”

As if on cue, Kyle climbed up the ladder, as he always was expected to go first. He pushed on the hatch, firmly enough to open it if it was unlocked, but delicately enough to not break any locks, as it was unlikely that they’d put in a lock good enough to withstand a knock from a combat synthetic. The hatch was indeed bolted from the other side.

Rather than break it, Kyle put his capabilities to good use. He laid his hand on the underside of the hatch, pressing and feeling the hatch’s full length, feeling where the pressure applied by the bolt ran along the hatch, his psionics giving him a full image and feel of the hatch. Once he knew where the bolt was, Kyle projected his telekinesis onto it, very slowly and silently pushing to bolt to the side. It worked, as Kyle was then able to push the hatch open just enough to see where it emerged.

“It’s a server room,” Kyle told the others telepathically, “I’m not seeing-“

Kyle had been going to say; “I’m not seeing any movement.” This was cut off however when he did see movement of something walking among the rows upon rows of servers; a light blue, thickly armored, humanoid robot with a rather large gun for its right forearm. Kyle’s hand flashed to his pistol, then he thought better of it and slowly and silently closed the hatch, then dropped down the ladder, rejoining Jack, Harune, Buchner, and Tsurabaya.

“It’s a huge server room,” Kyle said, “with a big blue metal motherfucker on patrol.”

Harune: “How big?”

Kyle: “About three meters high, maybe one and a quarter meters wide, giant gun for a right forearm.”

Buchner: “Guard robot. You think we can kill it?”

Kyle: “Easily. But I don’t want shots fired in the server room.”

Jack: “What are you thinking Daedalus?”

Kyle: “Remember Okinawa?”

Jack: “Of course. Get to the fucking point.”

Kyle: “I think I can do that again. Wire myself into the servers and control this base. Fuck being blind.”

Tsurabaya: “I like your thinking. I can kill the big motherfucker with a few good strikes from a sword.”

Tsurabaya punctuated these last words by extending his collapsible plasma-edged Arasaka sword and giving it a few practice swings.

“You have my blessing, Perseus,” Kyle said, “try not to get shot in the dick.”

With a sly smile, Tsurabaya collapsed and holstered his sword, and climbed up the ladder. Here, he did just as Kyle had, lifting the hatch ever so slightly in order to peer around the room, and when he’d decided the coast was clear, he lifted the hatch and climbed through into the server room. Just a few

seconds later, though it felt an eternity, the sound of metal hitting concrete was heard.

"Help!" Tsurabaya shouted a moment later.

"Everybody up! Engage!" Jack ordered, and the rest of the crew fairly charged up the ladder to the server farm.

Once inside, the little group instantly saw why Tsurabaya had called for help. While he had successfully cut off the robot's gun arm, the robot apparently had much faster reflexes than one would have supposed, given its bulky frame. Tsurabaya's sword lay on the ground, having been thrown away, and Tsurabaya himself was forced into a hand-to-hand engagement with the robot. While his enhancements ensured he was holding his own, he was hardly "winning."

"No guns! Engage!" Kyle ordered, and the group charged, still avoiding damaging the servers.

The robot was tough. For every attack, it seemed to have a counterattack, and its reflexes were far faster than would seem possible for such a large and heavy body, and so none of the group walked away without a few bruises. The fight ended when Harune was able to "jump" to behind the robot and leap onto its back and stab it in the head with a sword. This still did not kill the robot, which shook Harune off as it lunged forward, many wires now exposed. Jack expertly stepped around its lunging attack, grabbing its wires, which he then pulled out. At last, the robot fell. By some miracle, none of the servers were damaged.

"What the fuck is wrong with this place?" Kyle demanded once the robot was dead.

"What do you mean?" Harune asked.

"That thing should've been no problem," Kyle said, "I feel weakened down here. I tried to use my telekinesis and couldn't."

The group fell silent, reflecting as their adrenaline lessened. Kyle was correct; for soldiers as enhanced and capable as they

were, the robot should've been quick and easy to kill in seconds, with no injury.

"It must be that electromagnetic field," Jack said, "it's fucking with our augments. Maybe even directing them."

"I'm hacking in," Kyle said, "watch the doors and let's get out of here."

Kyle moved to one of the servers, looking for an exposed cable. There were quite a few, so Kyle trusted his base programming "instinct" to tell him the correct wire. When he'd found it, Kyle first carefully cut it with his diamond-edged knife, then stripped it. Next, Kyle steeled himself, cutting into his arm to expose a thin wire, right where he knew it was. At last, he twisted the stripped wire around his internal wire, merging his brain with the mainframe of the base's computer.

It's quite difficult to describe in words the experience of being at one with a computer whilst remaining autonomous. It's perhaps best described as a stream of consciousness, an ever branching river of ones and zeros, through which an outside mind may drift at will once they have access.

Kyle first attempted to find a map of the base to ease the group in navigation. It turned out that none existed. No digital map of the base had been made, perhaps due to fear of hacking. What was present, however, was a catalog of all objects that had entered the base. The spider sword was indeed among them, or had once been. It had exited the base in 1990, along with all staff and most equipment, only a few robots left behind to run the base until it was deemed useful again by the new Russian government.

With this news, Kyle unplugged himself from the computer, pinching closed the cut on his arm which he held shut for a moment, allowing his body to begin its job of repairing small wounds. This done, Kyle pulled his pistol and fired a few shots

into the server he'd just been plugged into, destroying it once and for all.

"What are you doing?" Harune demanded as he ran to Kyle's side, his own gun in hand.

"Blowing some shit up," Kyle said, then, turning to the group, he shouted; "We're clearing out. This op is terminated!"

"The sword?" Jack called back.

"It's gone. Let's get out of here while we still can!"

Jack, Tsurabaya, and Buchner didn't need to be told twice. They all rallied around the hatch, and one by one, they went down, Kyle leaving last as usual. By now, Kyle had somehow become the one in possession of the sonic bazooka. This he raised to his shoulder and fired into the server farm. The weapons decimated the servers almost to powder, and thus Kyle kept up until all of the servers were destroyed.

"Fuck this place," Kyle muttered, surveying the wreckage before at last dropping down the ladder.

No one much spoke until the group had reentered the shuttle.

"Alright," Tsurabaya said, "where do we go from here?"

"I'm open to suggestions," Kyle said, and all leaned back in their seats to think. It was Harune who first spoke up.

Harune: "Just why are these swords so hard to find anyway? The spiders have nests right, and they all have queens, don't they?"

Jack: "That's not the issue. The problem is in the carving. The husks are indestructible; only a few are able to carve them accurately."

Another pause for reflection.

Buchner: "What if we killed a queen ourselves?"

Jack: "Even if we did, what then?"

Buchner: "Then we drag the big bitch's leg to one of these natives, make them carve it, at gunpoint if necessary."

Jack: “You can’t do that anymore. We can take it in and ask nicely.”

“All this assuming we can kill a queen in the first place,” Tsurabaya said, finishing the conversation once again for a short while.

“What are we thinking? I can’t even tell,” Harune said at last, breaking the silence.

“I’m thinking that we’ve bitten off more than we can chew,” Kyle said, staring off into space.

“I told you so,” Jack said with an insufferable pedantic grin.

“Why could we not take out a queen?” Buchner cut in, “Aren’t we supposed to be good at that sort of thing?”

“Yes,” Kyle said decisively, “now we just need to find a queen.”

With that, Kyle flipped open his wrist computer, and turned onto the Mars Net, where he did a search for “spider queens,” and began reading out the information.

“Spider queens are quite rare. Only one in every 30 nests contains a queen, who rules over a cluster of nests. Queen nests are denoted by their massive entrances and their larger citizen inhabitants. Fascinating.”

“Let’s reconvene at the house,” Jack said, “gather some supplies and make a plan of attack.”

“Sounds good enough for me,” Kyle said, then nodded at Harune, who lifted the shuttle, jetting off towards The Eagle’s Claw.

“That was fast,” Joshie observed, rather sarcastically, as he stood to greet them at the ramp shuttle.

“Not over yet,” Jack said, “we need to convene. Where is everyone?”

“They went on a bank run in the other shuttle,” Joshie explained, “it’s just me and Cheng.”

“The Cheng and I,” Jack quipped.

Kyle was surprised, and slightly impressed, that Prometheus had not only allowed the use of her shuttle without his presence, but that she had done so without his input.

“You two will have to do,” Kyle said, “for now anyway. We have some planning to do.”

Cheng was gathered from the little greenhouse which the Medusas had built at some earlier date. The present Medusas thus convened at the side of the lake, and continued their discussion. It was Joshie who had an idea.

Joshie: “What about the locals? They must know how to hunt a queen, if they know how to carve one.”

Jack: “Only certain tribes know it.”

Kyle: “Well. If there’s one woman who’d know that, I know who she is.”

Harune: “Well who?”

Kyle: “Dr. Ainsley Horton. Of the Institute of Investigative Fucking Marsology. The ‘fucking’ part is my own addition, to express my displeasure.”

Jack let out a groan, and of course all else present looked confused.

“An archaeologist I’ve had the misfortune to meet,” Kyle explained, “though she is who found Prometheus. Or her team anyway. I’ll start finding my way to her.”

“Just call Georg,” Jack said, “he should know how to reach her.”

Georg didn’t pick up, it turned out, nor did Emmermann himself. They must be out of range, or on an operation, or most likely both, and thus, someone did a MarsNet search for The Institute of Investigative Marsology, and were rather surprised when they found it, with an address included. Kyle had always

been left with the impression that it was some kind of secret institution.

As a public institution, The Institute of Investigative Marsology had both a telephone phone number and a "dial code" for inter computer communication. As The Eagle's Claw didn't have a telephone, Kyle dialed the latter. The receptionist AI who answered was quite helpful, and assured that Kyle's message would be passed along to Dr. Horton whenever she was next in range of a computer or glass pad.

"What makes you think she'll even get back to you?" Cheng asked.

"She'll get back. The question is in if she'll be cooperative," Kyle said, not as confident in his mind as he sounded.

Kyle was correct, as it turned out, though several days passed before Dr. Horton returned his message, and in her usual fashion showing no tact, simply calling Kyle's dial code with no warning or regard for timings. It was quite well the middle of the night when the call came in to Kyle's wrist computer, and Kyle dutifully rose from his bed, exited the house, and answered.

"Good evening. There goes my beauty sleep," Kyle said.

"Do synthetics have beauty sleep? Because archaeologists do not," Horton said evenly.

"Getting to the point," Kyle said, "I'm sure you're familiar with spider swords?"

"The big military man needs my help to find a weapon? How the tables have turned," Horton quipped.

Kyle and Dr. Horton talked at length then, in their usual sparring fashion, with Horton telling all she knew. Apparently, the tradition of queen hunting was confined in large part to the hill tribes of southern Mars. According to Horton, these tribes were still relatively easy to find, as much of Mars's southern hemisphere had been spared the worst of The Black Terror. The

process was dependent apparently on the use of poison gathered from the Martian Lilac, delivered by spear or arrow, once the nest had been evacuated via fire.

Dr. Horton offered two suggestions; locate a tribe, or go to a likely abandoned holy site she was aware of. Kyle decided that the more pragmatic and perhaps generally politically advantageous was to locate one of the hill tribes. In some way, he found this mission tedious now, and somehow beneath the Medusas. But he'd gotten them into it, and must get them out. Resolutely, Kyle returned to the house, and in the morning, briefed everyone after breakfast, looking for volunteers, not that he much needed them for such a thing.

As it happened, only Cheng and Max decided to volunteer, Cheng out of a sense of anthropological curiosity, and Max no doubt out of testosterone. David also came, because he was required as a pilot. For the op, Kyle and company donned street clothes, deciding they'd be better received by the tribes if they attempted to pass themselves off as anthropologists rather than military assets. However, they did bring their plasma-edged swords and a Fernandes pump-action grenade launcher, which seemed the most useful anti-spider weapons, if things should go south. With this all packed, Kyle, Max, Cheng, and David loaded into Prometheus, flying to the southern mountainous regions which Dr. Horton had told them about.

Unfortunately, Kyle and myself are unable to recall the name of the mountain range which the group ultimately reached, or the tribe which they encountered. However, the tribe's Chief was more than happy to show these curious anthropologists the process of hunting a queen, which seems worth describing, and I'll do so thus.

The process began, naturally, with locating a queen to begin with. This was done by sending out a party of hunters, all of

them psionically gifted and able to block the light precognitive abilities of the larger spiders, and to view a spider's nest via nonlinear sight upon seeing a spider. All through the hunt, the hunters walked in a staggered, uneven fashion, making their footsteps impossible to track. Even still, a spider or other predator might spot or track the hunters. These were dispatched quite rapidly via bows and arrows or spears.

Eventually, a nest containing a queen would be located. It was here that Kyle and the others learned that the spiders of the southern hemisphere were different. In addition to being larger than those up north, southern spiders were of the trapdoor variety, hiding in nests which were covered by trapdoors constructed of foliage and bits of rockery, from which the spiders would emerge at the sound or scent of passing prey, putting themselves at less risk than the more adventurous spiders up north.

When a nest containing a queen had been found, the first step was to pass just close enough to the trapdoor to lure out one of the spiders. The lured spider would then be shot with a flaming arrow. This would catch the spider's fur on fire, and the spider would instinctively flee back to the nest, setting the webbing and eggs, and many other spiders on fire, forcing the nest to evacuate.

As the nest was evacuating, the hunters would kill the fleeing spiders with a volley of arrows and spears. At this stage, Max finally got the chance to use the Fernandes grenade launcher, which he'd been fairly itching to do since he'd seen it in the Medusas' inventory weeks earlier.

The queen herself emerged from the nest last. The queen which Kyle and company assisted in hunting was at least 40 feet in width, with three massive jaws. She was killed by the tribe's lead hunter, with a large spear tipped with the massive, shark-

like tooth of some local reptile. This spear was coated in the highly poisonous essential oil of a Martian Lilac, which took out even a beast the size of a queen spider in under 60 seconds.

Kyle, Max, Cheng, and David then lived for several days alongside the tribe, awaiting the carving of the sword they'd come for. The old man who carved swords, it turned out, had the impression that Kyle was to be the recipient, as the leader of the group, (the tribespeople had even taken to calling him "Chief Kyle") and into the white side of the sword, he carved an inscription; "Chief Kyle- Engineered for perfection."

This inscription made Kyle very happy, and quite impressed. The old sword carver must have somehow sensed that Kyle was a synthetic, and in this distant space, such a thing was impressive, rather than something to be maligned. With all this completed, the crew returned to The Eagle's Claw.

"Right," Kyle pronounced, "last step; deliver to the good Herr Wang."

"His favorite girl should know where he lives," Jack said, "I don't like the idea of delivering the thing in the Hub. Too many prying eyes."

"Medusas, you're all coming," Kyle ordered, "you're to peruse all he has to offer. After all this trouble, he owes us more than just armor suits."

Wang's favorite girl, a red-haired German named Marta, got his address simply by asking, with the promise of making a "house call," as she called it. Wang Yu Nong, it turned out, was doing quite well for himself, having a mountain all his own in the Tartarus Province, which was where all the Medusas went to collect their fee.

"Well shit, he's well off," was Cheng's remark when Wang Yu Nong's home came into view.

Wang Yu Nong's home looked like nothing so much as a white Mughal fort, positioned atop a flat-topped mountain. In spite of the very North Indian architecture, the roofs were unmistakably Chinese. It was an odd bit of architectural syncretism that, in Kyle's opinion, didn't quite work.

"There's an opened side of the mountain down there," Klein pointed out, "that's probably where you land."

David pulled Prometheus to the side of the mountain, which was really more like a slightly angled plateau, where indeed there was what appeared to be a garage, shielded by a triple layer force field. A robotic feminine voice came over Prometheus's intercom, speaking Mandarin.

"Greetings Prometheus," the voice said, "is Mr. Wang expecting you?"

"He is," Prometheus said, "we've brought his phallic substitute."

"One moment please. I must confirm," the robotic voice finished, and a few moments later, the force fields parted, allowing David to park Prometheus in the Uberconcrete garage carved from the mountain.

Wang Yu Nong, dressed in another of his embroidered jackets, stood at an elevator door. The Medusas exited Prometheus and approached him.

"Welcome, welcome," Wang Yu Nong said, "is that my sword?"

Jack pulled the sword from the rucksack he carried it in, then withdrew when Wang reached for it.

"You get your sword when we get our suits and other payment," Jack said firmly.

Wang chuckled, then with an approving nod, led the Medusas onto the elevator. As the elevator ascended for several minutes, in silence, Kyle did what he sometimes did in these scenarios;

quietly began reading the minds of those around him. What he got was a general sentiment that the Medusas should kill Wang and take whatever inventory he had on hand. These notions, when he caught them, Kyle quickly telepathically dispelled; they were utterly absurd.

The elevator arrived in the sprawling courtyard of the fort. The garden here was, once again, of the Chinese variety. However, upon examination, the plants and trees were all synthetic, and the sole little pond was holographic. So, Kyle thought, Wang Yu Nong's pockets might be deep, but they weren't bottomless. This no doubt made him insecure, and therefore exploitable.

Wang Yu Nong led the Medusas into one of the small buildings built off the inside of the fort's wall, which he proudly referred to as his "business center." Inside was essentially a banquet hall, but rather than being laden with food, the three long tables inside were laden with goods. Most common, as one might expect, were weapons, but there were also wrist computers, medical devices, tools, ammunition, air filters, etcetera. Everything a budding colonist or soldier for hire might need.

"Alright," Kyle said, "let's see the armor."

With a sly smile, Wang went to a curtained rack at the end of the room, and pulled aside the curtain, revealing the promised eleven armor suits. The suits were all black, and seemed to be more updated and streamlined versions of the armor which had been worn at Cheyenne Mountain, and an examination showed that the suits all had numerous holsters, wrist computers, radios in the helmets, little filters on the backs which would filter any air into being breathable, and a pair of little plasma jets running along the backs of the legs from just below the knees to the bottoms of the feet, enabling propulsion and steering in a zero g

environment. On impulse, Kyle took out his .357 Magnum and fired at the face plate of one suit; not a scratch, except in Wang Yu Nong's veneer at this flash of violence.

"Well, Mr. Wang, you've outdone yourself," Klein commented, "now to pay you."

Kyle and Jack were surprised at this bit of assertiveness on behalf of the usually silent Klein. It was out of line perhaps, but they let it pass for the time being. Jack opened the rucksack and took out the spider sword, which Wang snatched covetously.

"Right then," Jack said, "what does everyone else need?"

"Hold on," Wang said, "I've delivered what you asked for. Unless you have more payment-"

"The client we're providing is payment enough," Kyle cut in. "Give me a piece of paper, I'll give you his enforcer's dial code."

No doubt imagining he was humoring Kyle, Wang got a small notebook from his desk, which sat at the end of the room, and handed it and a pen to Kyle, who summarily wrote Georg's dial code, which he handed back to Wang.

"You have my word, as a man and a German and a synthetic, that you won't regret it," Kyle said, halfway meaning it, and halfway exploiting the commonly held myth that synthetics cannot lie. It paid off.

"Alright," Wang said, "some people think you toasters are a threat. But I don't. I like business partners who tell the truth. Have a look around. If you need something specific, I can check my inventory."

Hofnitz: "I need medical supplies. Stitch machines, oxypens, all that sort of thing."

Franz: "Klein and I need digital scopes. Good ones."

Buchner: "I need weapon repair kits. Up to date ones for plasma weapons. And we could do with a sonic cannon that's less than 20 years old."

“And we all could do with one of those digiphones for morale,” Jack finished, and the inclusion made the others smile. A digiphone was easily acquired at any colonial music shop, but Jack was getting it free.

“I can deliver all that in three days,” Wang said, “this had better pay off.”

Wang sat at his computer to fill out the invoice, and the Medusas perused. Quite cleverly, all the goods on display were mere “floor models.” The guns were unloaded and had their firing mechanisms removed, and the various bits of tech on offer were all decommissioned. Wang Yu Nong kept himself alive by showing his clients what was possible, rather than immediately available, which disincentivized his clients from killing him and absconding with the goods, as a few Medusas had wanted.

Added to the list by Buchner after finding its “floor model” was a gun which she would eventually dub “The Matryoshka,” a nickname which the Medusas would immediately adopt for it. This gun was a rail rifle, which fired caseless rounds from an internal magazine, which in itself wasn’t unique. What was unique was that it was designed to fire a specific round. These rounds were large, armor piercing bullets, each of them sharp on both ends, and every one had a tiny GPS in itself. A bullet would be fired, and with a press of a button on the side, the bullet would rehome to the gun via a hole in the mag well for reuse. A single bullet could be reused dozens of times, depending on how tough its targets were.

This all added to the delivery inventory, the Medusas left, taking their new armor suits with them, after David had given Wang the coordinates of The Eagle’s Claw. Upon arriving at The Eagle’s Claw with their suits, Tsurabaya took a tiny plasma blade and engraved each callsign on the left breast of each suit. The callsigns at the time were as follows:

Ares (Jack)
Daedalus (Kyle)
Apollo (David)
Hades (Franz)
Heracles (Max)
Icarus (Harune)
Perseus (Tsurabaya)
Atalanta (Buchner)
Alectrona (Cheng)
Achilles (Joshie)
Medea (Kovac)
Demeter (Hofnitz)
Orpheus (Klein)

The Medusas were as surprised as they were pleased when a long, sleek, silver shuttle craft appeared above The Eagle's claw, and then landed on the beach of the lake. Kyle looked through his binoculars and saw Wang seated in the front of the shuttle, which was piloted by a blonde female synthetic of a much less passing model than Kyle, as her hands were pure metal with no artificial skin, and her artificial skin itself far too perfect to be convincing.

Kyle and several of the others had been fishing by the lake. One of the others flipped open their wrist computer and sent a message to the house AI, ordering said AI to tell the others to come to the beach. This done, Kyle and the others who'd been fishing approached the shuttle, from which Wang Yu Nong was already alighting. Kyle's group met him at the open back of the shuttle.

Kyle: "Is this all the things that we ordered?"

Far be it from Kyle to engage in pleasantries, even and perhaps especially in a business meeting.

Wang: “Yes Mr. Dellschau, it is. I called that dial code. I think I like where this is going.”

Kyle: “You spoke to Georg. Has Herr Emmermann received the sword yet?”

Wang: “All will happen in good time.”

A few minutes later, all the Medusas had arrived, and thus unloaded all the various goods which Wang had brought. He’d brought all that was promised. Buchner got the “Matryoshka” guns she’d ordered, along with several boxes of ammunition, Franz and Klein got their scopes, Hofnitz got her medical equipment, and the group as a whole got their digiphone.

The real payoff, however, was yet to come, and only did so about a fortnight after the goods had arrived. The Medusas had just eaten their dinner, and were doing their usual things; milling about, watching television, reading books on their wrist computers, etcetera, when someone, possibly Cheng, called out that there was a transmission coming through to the house’s AI. Thus, everyone hurriedly gathered around the built-in television screen, which switched to the transmission, revealing Emmermann seated behind his desk.

Emmermann: “Greetings. Whose idea was it to send me this sword?”

Kyle: “That would be me, Sir.”

Emmermann: “Indeed? Well, such a gesture deserves a reward. I want everyone who partook in the hunt to be ready for pick-up in one hour. The rest, if there are any, are to stay behind. Over and out.”

The transmission ended practically as quickly as it had begun. As soon as it did so, the grumbling began. It was exemplified by Franz’s comment of; “Why the fuck do you get to go off and get pampered and the rest of us don’t?”

“Alright, alright!” Jack at last shouted over the commotion, “Maybe this is a lesson for all of you to start showing a bit of initiative. This whining is unacceptable. Now, let’s the rest get packed.”

And so, Kyle, Jack, Max, David, Tsurabaya, Cheng, Harune, and Buchner got their overnight packs together, which took no more than five minutes, and thus gathered on the beach, awaiting Emmermann’s usual pick up craft. It arrived at one hour to the second from the end of the transmission. German punctuality is nothing to trifle with. The craft was the usual shipping container-esque affair, though it had new external plating, and was much shinier than usual. The group boarded, and as usual, the craft lifted and “jumped” to one of Emmermann’s homes. A glance out the window showed that it was Emmermann’s Valhalla home, which was described in chapter 14 of the second volume of this book, if the reader is curious.

“He’s sure in a good mood,” Kyle commented.

“He must really like his sword,” Buchner said sardonically, earning chuckles all round.

The ship landed at the same landing pad it had during Kyle’s last visit; a small one, at the end of a path leading to a staircase up to a bridge across a brook, on the other side of which was Emmermann’s castle, which jutted out from a mountain. The alpenhorn players which had lined the bridge on Kyle’s last visit were nowhere to be seen, but one man who was to be seen was Georg, who stood at the edge of the landing pad.

Kyle ran to his old friend with his usual enthusiasm, which was reciprocated as always, then glanced over the group. He noted immediately that Max was uncharacteristically sober. After a moment, it dawned on him why; the last time Max had been on this planet, he’d spent two weeks here with Andrew.

“The Old Man is in an excellent mood,” Georg said cheerfully, “let’s get you all inside.”

The group thus headed up the path, as usual splitting into their little splinter groups; Max with Harune and David, Buchner with Tsurabaya, Jack determinedly alone, Cheng drifting from person to person, and Kyle with Georg in back of the group, talking conspiratorially in telepathy.

Kyle: “You know my usual question; what’s he playing at?”

Georg: “And you know my usual answer, which is that I have no clue.”

Kyle: “Must be something big, if he’s being this generous.”

The group of Kyle, Georg, Jack, Max, Buchner, Harune, Tsurabaya, David, and Cheng reached the monstrous double doors of the castle, where Emmermann stood waiting, holding the spider sword, and looking very pleased to see his guests.

“Welcome,” Emmermann said, “everyone come right in. We’ve much to discuss. But first your rewards.”

With that, Emmermann turned, leading the group through his taxidermy plastered entryway, down a short series of hallways, which after a moment Kyle realized was the route to the weapons museum. He was proven correct when Emmermann turned to a staircase going downward, which was definitely towards the weapons museum.

“Welcome, Admiral Emmermann. Vocal authorization code required,” a robotic voice came from a speaker above the wide, white double doors.

“New voice operated security system,” Emmermann explained, then turning back to the speaker, loudly said; “Open the fucking door.”

The doors swung open.

“Open the fucking door? That’s the password?” Max laughed.

“It’s easy to remember,” Emmermann said with a classic German shrug, and then addressing the group, began one of his usual speeches.

Emmermann: “Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve done good work. You’ve brought me this rare masterpiece of a weapon, and delivered me a new business partner. For this you deserve a reward. Peruse these weapons I have on display. Each of you may have a single, personal use weapon. Choose wisely. Meet me in the bar for a case of Corelian when you’ve chosen.”

With that, Emmermann and Georg left, and the excited group of Kyle, Jack, Max, Buchner, Harune, David, Cheng, and Tsurabaya went to survey the room. It took about two hours, but in the end, all walked away with a weapon of their choosing. Most walked away with swords of various kinds, but Kyle and Harune chose alien weapons. Kyle chose the MASER pistol of Ceradean origin. The ability to take out a target from a distance, with little chance of being detected due to the MASER beam being invisible, was too good to pass up. Harune chose the Draco blade. It looked at first glance like a Roman Gladius, but a click of a button on the grip would start the blade spinning, turning an already highly dangerous weapon into a guaranteed agent of death.

Eventually, with their weapons chosen, the group returned to the ground level of the castle, Jack leading the way to the art deco speakeasy style bar. As promised, Emmermann had a bottle of Corelian whiskey to share, a large one which was approximately 50 years old. Most of the group got drunk, and eventually, as always, Kyle began feeling a need to indulge his baser needs, and with a wave of approval from Emmermann, went on the prowl. Kyle quickly found a maid and, finding her attractive enough, approached her and took her to one of the

bedrooms. Her skills were such that Kyle wished he could have employed her at The Glass Hub.

Most of the men satisfied themselves in turn, save for Jack who was rather too drunk, and the group returned to The Eagle's Claw. They found the other Medusas jealous of their new weapons, but over dinner that evening, there was a change in the atmosphere that, at first, Kyle couldn't pinpoint, but at last it came to him; the Medusas, now outfitted and with a routine, were finally beginning to feel and act like a unit. Now all that remained was for their work to begin in earnest.

Author's note. A short explanation of two terms which my readers may not be familiar with is in order, these terms being "digiphone" and "oxypen." As the reader may have guessed, "digiphone" is an abbreviation of "digital gramophone," and is a kind of portable music player common in the Breakaway. It resembles a small suitcase record player, and plays any song which is typed in by the user on its little keyboard which is pulled out from the middle. An "oxypen" is an automatic syringe containing a small amount of highly oxygenated artificial blood, which, when applied, allows the user to survive a spacing for far longer than they could naturally.

Chapter 7

As the following few weeks passed, with the Medusas oscillating between Mars and Camp Hero, Kyle saw little action, and indeed the Medusas as a whole saw no action as a coherent group. However, a few individually did, as they were still under contract, either from Project Phoenix or from third parties. For instance, Buchner was thrice recalled to Russia for some hours, though from her perspective it was likely much longer, and Tsurabaya was required to attend two Arasaka events.

For the second event, Tsurabaya took Kyle along as his guard. The event, as it turned out, was housed directly within Arasaka tower, a sail-fin shaped skyscraper in the center of New Munich. It was here that Kyle learned that New Munich, and the planet it sat on, were in the Vega star system. Kyle wasn't entirely certain why he was invited, but he did gain a certain sadistic pleasure in striking up conversations with guests, talking with them fairly in depth about this subject or that, and then revealing that he was a synthetic and watching their eyes glass over in shock and disgust.

Eventually, as Kyle drifted through the crowd in utter boredom, he ran directly into Shinji Arasaka Sr, looking rather regal in a black kimono with a gold handwoven pattern of various birds.

"My deepest apologies, Shinji-Sama," Kyle said, feeling a tiny jolt of terror. In spite of how brave he'd acted during their first meeting, Shinji Sr. still inspired terror in the purely computer part of Kyle's brain.

“You seem to have slipped, Kyle-san,” Shinji Sr. replied, “should I tell Dr. Tarakada that you need an upgrade?”

“No, Sir. All systems online,” Kyle said after a momentary self scan, “is there anything more?”

“Yes,” Shinji Sr. said, “come meet my daughter.”

Shinji Sr. took Kyle’s arm and led him over to a young looking, slim, very beautiful young woman, who stood to one side of the ballroom sipping champagne and nibbling on a plate of prawns, coldly and calculatingly observing the scene before her. She was, of course, Sakura Saimashi, the second eldest of the Arasaka children.

Kyle recoiled ever so slightly when Sakura extended her hand. Not in fear, but in general disgust. In recent months, Kyle had, via Harune recovering memories, learned some of the extent of Sakura’s depravity, namely that she, in service of Shinji Sr’s aim of “manning up” Harune, had forced him, at katana point, to kill several small animals, and had quite possibly molested Harune, though this point was still spotty in memory.

“Sakura-sama I presume? How do you do?” Kyle asked, his cool returning instantly.

“I do quite well,” Sakura replied, accepting Kyle’s outstretched hand, then turning to Shinji Sr. asked, “Who is this Father?”

“This is AB8-1305874,” Shinji Sr. said, “or should I say, Kyle Dellschau.”

“I see,” Sakura said, then turning back to Kyle and looking him over, added, “Even for an AB model you’re impressive. Almost human.”

“Or perhaps the next step in evolution,” Kyle said in mock thoughtfulness.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps not,” Sakura said evenly, then took another long sip of champagne. “What do you do, Mr. Dellschau?”

At least she used my name, Kyle thought before speaking.

“I’m a soldier. The rest is classified. If you’ll excuse me,” Kyle said, beginning to turn away.

“I recognize your serial number,” Sakura said, ignoring Kyle’s request to leave, “you caused quite a stir when you came from the vat.”

This gave Kyle pause.

“I did?” Kyle asked, remembering Dr. Tarakada’s fear and the tortures he’d had to endure before being purchased by Emmermann.

“You were a bit too good,” Sakura explained, “caused me considerable trouble in particular, but the rest is classified. If you’ll excuse me.”

It wasn’t a request of course, and so Sakura turned and half slinked, half glided away, able somehow to still move silently in spite of her high heels on the hard wooden floor. Like a true shinobi, Kyle thought, admiring Sakura’s skill in spite of his dislike of the woman herself. He determined to ask Georg about the veracity of Sakura’s claims. He was the only person Kyle trusted to be truthful on the subject.

The rest of the evening passed in relative quiet, Kyle always keeping an eye on Tsurabaya, who after all had brought him as a bodyguard. He was unsure why; at no point did Tsurabaya appear under threat, and given that the company whom Tsurabaya worked for was hosting the party, it seemed nonsensical that he should feel himself under threat.

The party came to an end, and Kyle and Tsurabaya left, in the same black triangular craft they’d first arrived in, deciding to stretch out on the seats and sleep for most of the 14-hour

return trip. They arrived back at Camp Hero just before lights out, and thus walked most of the way back to the house with only the light from the permanent sunset, dodging patrols and searchlights much as they'd learned to do prior to the revolution.

The night passed, and in the morning, Kyle made his excuses to the Medusas and headed for Prometheus.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," Prometheus said, "it's been some time."

"I'm sorry," Kyle said, meaning it, then continued; "seal the doors."

"Yes Captain," Prometheus replied, as Kyle made his way to the bridge.

"Patch me through to Georg, please," Kyle said, taking the pilot's seat. He wasn't sure why he'd decided to make this journey to make a call. Perhaps it was because it was the only place he'd be guaranteed privacy.

Prometheus followed Kyle's request, and a few minutes later, Georg's visage appeared on the wrap around holographic screen that Prometheus always projected during transmissions.

Georg: "Kyle! Good to see you Brother. If this is about a lack of assignments, I'm-"

Kyle: "No Brother. This is a personal call."

Georg: "Oh. Hit me with it. What happened, you stick your dick somewhere you shouldn't have?"

"No," Kyle laughed, "it's more serious. Georg, am I a threat?"

A pause.

Georg: "What brings this on? You're a living, highly adaptive, mostly indestructible killing machine who blends into the population flawlessly. Of course you're a threat."

Kyle: "When you said you were the reason my ass wasn't on the scrap heap, what did you mean?"

Georg went slightly pale.

Georg: "Alright Kyle, you deserve to know I guess. You were too good when they woke you up. And so The Old Man wanted you more than ever. But the old Jap wouldn't give you up without a favor."

Kyle: "What sort of a favor?"

Georg: "His son-in-law had to die. His name was Tommy Saimashi. I killed him in one of the Corelian spires."

There was a pause, before Kyle threw his head back, laughing in relief.

Kyle: "You shot some asshole. That's fucking it?"

Georg: "Well yes. I suppose it is. It seemed like a bigger deal at the time."

Kyle: "Clearly. Well, I'm grateful you did it."

Georg: "I did wonder if you'd ever ask. They did program you with a deplorable lack of curiosity."

Kyle: "Perhaps so. I suppose that's all I need."

Georg and Kyle chatted a while longer, about this and that, Georg promising he'd be there for Max's 18th birthday, which was for some reason upcoming two years early. Kyle signed off with an expression of his "need" for female company.

"I'm also a woman you know, Captain," Prometheus said.

"Yeah, but I can't exactly fuck you," Kyle said dryly.

"You can if you want. Come to the core room," Prometheus enticed.

The offer was too intriguing to pass up, and so Kyle stood from the Captain's chair and went to the "core room," that is to say the white cylindrical room with the glass pillar filled with the mysterious red liquid which housed Prometheus's consciousness. When Kyle entered, he found it occupied by a tall, curvaceous blonde. His ideal woman, projected by Prometheus.

“I can work with this,” Kyle said, feeling a world away as he hurriedly began removing every stitch of clothing.

What followed might best be described as “psychic sex,” between Kyle and Prometheus, with Prometheus projecting a virtual room in addition to her virtual body. While it was not truly much more than masturbation on Kyle’s part, assisted by an AI made virtual reality, it felt just as physical and satisfying in the moment as the real thing.

“I’m available whenever you want, Captain,” Prometheus assured once the session had ended and Kyle was slipping his clothes back on, “I’m not authorized to say no, nor will I want to.”

“Every man’s dream,” Kyle laughed.

The experience gave Kyle a new perspective on Prometheus. While he was of course glad that he now had guaranteed sex, of whatever type he felt like, at any time with what felt like a real woman, he now also saw Prometheus as more digital than he had before. No natural woman was capable of being as willing or understanding as Prometheus. This made Kyle respect her even more, and while he remained forever incapable of romantic love, he certainly wished he was capable of it.

At some point, this capacity for a feeling of which he was incapable put Kyle in a songwriting mood. The song which he wrote morphed its way into the following number.

Look into my eyes,
You will see
What you mean to me.
Search your heart,
Search your soul,
And when you find me there,
You’ll search no more.

Don't tell me
It's not worth tryin' for.
You can't tell me
It's not worth dyin' for.
You know it's true:
Everything I do,
I do it for you.

Look into your heart,
You will find
There's nothin' there to hide.
Take me as I am,
Take my life.
I would give it all,
I would sacrifice.

Don't tell me
It's not worth fightin' for.
I can't help it,
There's nothin' I want more.
You know it's true:
Everything I do,
I do it for you.

There's no love
Like your love,
And no other
Could give more love.
There's nowhere
Unless you're there
All the time,

All the way.
Yeah!

Look into your heart, babe.
Oh, you can't tell me
It's not worth tryin' for.
I can't help it,
There's nothing I want more.

Yeah, I would fight for you,
I'd lie for you,
Walk the wire for you,
Yeah, I'd die for you.

You know it's true:
Everything I do,
Oh, I do it for you.

Kyle also, after the meeting with Georg just recounted, decided to resolve his "deplorable lack of curiosity," or at least to pretend to do so, and to start, he decided to ask and find out more about the pasts of a few Medusas whom he didn't know well. As I'm unsure where else to do so, I'll insert the information he gained here.

Albert Klein, Kyle learned, was a 10th generation colonial, born very poor in a deep space mining and transit colony known as Neu Bremerhaven. His father, Johan Klein, was a scrapper and engineering savant, who'd brought the colony out of its financial and political hole by using whatever scraps and stolen blueprints he could to reverse engineer the medical tech and ships of Der Bund elites which passed through the colony port.

This was illegal of course, yet Johan's initiative and high intelligence had proven interesting to Der Bund, and so after spending some number of years as a prisoner doing slave labor on a cargo ship, he'd been allowed to return home, and given a posting as an engineer and arranged marriage to a government assigned wife and handler. All the family's children, including little Albert, had then been taken from the enforced poverty their parents lived in, taken to different military boarding schools, and groomed for a life in the military.

Albert, under these circumstances, had excelled as a spotter, and thus gained enough attention to appear on Emmermann's short list. His biggest hope was that he'd one day be able to locate his older brother and three younger sisters, none of whom had he seen since the age of seven.

Carina Buchner was very cagey when Kyle asked about her past, as one might expect given her track record. It was a caginess that Kyle ultimately would never manage to break through. However, Buchner was at least willing to say that she'd come from a small town on the Volga, though which town she couldn't remember, so young had she been when taken from her home and eventually begun being trained in a munitions factory off-world, producing plasma guns, smart swords, and the like.

This well enough explained where Buchner got her skills. The remaining mysteries- her Spanish speaking skills, her hatred of animals and children, where she went on missions several times a week- were all mysteries which Kyle would ultimately never know the answers to.

Yoshiro Tsurabaya was surprised when Kyle asked for more information regarding his past after all this time, but he was also the happiest to discuss it with his old friend, making the remark that no one ever seemed to ask about people's pasts in their line of work.

Tsurabaya's story was also the most eventful, by Kyle's estimation. Tsurabaya, by his own recollection, had lived a relatively normal, if fairly underprivileged life in New Kanazawa colony, where he'd been born in what he was fairly certain was the Earth year of 1890, and had been attending school when a number of scouts from the government had arrived and begun administering tests for psionic abilities on the children, and Tsurabaya had passed with flying colors. These government folk had enticed him with stories of flying spaceships and interstellar adventures, and enticed his family with patriotism and eye watering benefits, and the next thing he'd known, he was being bounced between two homes; one in New Kyoto, the other Camp Hero, both in the late 1960s to start.

This timing momentarily confused Kyle, but then, he realized, time travel truly was the answer to everything. Or almost everything, except for one important thing; knowing one's friends.

Author's Note. A very short chapter, included mostly to give a more proper introduction to Sakura Saimashi (nee Arasaka) and to fill in a few details regarding the lives of a few Medusas who I realized I hadn't included much background information on.

Chapter 8

The short lull experienced by the Medusas was, of course, not to last, and no more than a Martian month after their visit with Emmermann, The Eagle's Claw's house AI alerted them over lunch of a message requiring their attention. Harune flipped open his wrist computer and began reading the message.

"Oh, it's forwarded from Uncle Georg," Harune said, "there's an emergency distress signal coming in from a KBMG mining vessel called The Ragnarok. They were attacked by an alien life form. Survivor numbers dwindling, bring heavy weaponry and medical supplies, it says. That's it, other than coordinates. What's KBMG?"

"Kuiper Belt Mining Group," Jack explained, "but they mine all over now."

"Let's see the coordinates," David said, and Harune showed them. David closed his eyes, navigating in his mind via the starmaps already in his brain through programming and chip implants.

"It's in deep space," David said at last, "very deep space. Mantis territory. Probably take about 25 hours to get there."

"You heard the man. Finish your lunch, we leave in an hour," Kyle said, "we finally get to take our suits for a spin!"

A little cheer went up at this. While they had all of course tried on their suits and given them test runs, they'd had yet to put them to use in the field. Jack ordered that the suits be worn the full trip; he didn't want there to be constant bathroom, food, and sleep breaks like usual. Their suits on, their guns

loaded, medical supplies in hand, the Medusas boarded Prometheus, and set off. Once the flight was underway, Kyle pulled Jack aside for a few questions.

Kyle: "Tell me everything you know about this KBMG."

Jack: "I don't think there's very much to tell, all told. They're a mining company, owner is Giancarlo Vespucci, who has an Australian accent when he speaks English for some fucking reason. The diamond edges on our knives are likely courtesy of them."

Kyle: "When were they founded?"

Jack: "I have no idea. They've been around my father's circle for a long time. Since I was a child."

Kyle: "And what's their mining method? What are their ships like?"

Jack: "I've only seen a few, and they're huge, as a rule. Usually big and round. Their mining method is that they'll crack a planet with a type of gun and then mine the asteroids that result. They're not supposed to crack any planet with intelligent life, but who knows if they keep to that."

Kyle: "And their chances in the situation they're in? Hostile alien lifeform?"

Jack: "Miners are tough bastards, but they're not soldiers."

At some point on the flight, which was very long, just as David had predicted, Kyle took a look at his wrist computer, looking for more information about both mining ships in general, and The Ragnarok in particular, hoping that such information was available on the colonial net. It was, as it turned out, and Kyle found himself irritated that no information had been included when the Medusas had received their assignment. The obsession with making up one's mission as one went along was an obsession Kyle would never understand. Thus, he briefed

the Medusas, and as usual, I'll not describe the briefing, as all information which was relevant will be apparent soon enough.

"Alright ladies and gents we've arrived. Exiting subspace and - holy shit!" David exclaimed, as Prometheus exited subspace. The instant that Prometheus emerged, she was required to take control, dodging desperately to avoid a massive piece of debris.

"Oh my Gods," Jack half muttered, approaching Prometheus's bridge window to see the damage.

The Ragnarok, in its intact state, would have consisted of seven descending ring-shaped structures, connected by shafts, all surrounding the planet cracking gun, which was an enormous transparent sphere of some type of glass, in the center of which was a white light; a compressed star. Off the bottom of the sphere was a barrel, several miles long, which would be pointed at a planet, and when fired, the tiny pulse of energy from the compressed star would easily crack the planet into pieces.

When the Medusas arrived, only six of The Ragnarok's rings were attached. The top and largest ring was detached, and had itself been blown into three pieces. A number of shuttles, servers, and other assorted bits of debris floated in space. The remaining six rings were also mostly severely damaged, with the fourth ring down half gone.

"What the fuck happened here?" Max asked no one in particular.

"Excellent question," Kyle said, snapping into strategic mode, "Prometheus, lock onto that station's signal."

"Already done, Captain," Prometheus said, "hail them anytime."

Kyle walked to the front of the bridge, to the console which controlled Prometheus's radio that she'd taught him to use. Kyle pushed the required buttons and was greeted with the "beep!"

which indicated he was now broadcasting to whatever signal Prometheus was locked to.

Kyle: “Ragnarok, this is Captain Dellschau of the Prometheus responding to your distress call. Do you read? Over.”

“Oh thank the Gods,” a young female voice exclaimed over the radio almost instantly, “we’re losing oxygen. Only a few hours left for us down here.”

“Slow down,” Kyle said, “is this Captain McNeil?”

“This is Acting Second Officer Tankersley,” the young woman explained, “Captain McNeil was on Ring One. He’s dead.”

Kyle: “How many survivors?”

Tankersley: “36, not including synthetics.”

“Of course. Never include the synthetics”, Kyle thought before continuing.

Kyle: “Alright Officer Tankersley, we’re hoping you can fill us in; what happened to your ship, and is the threat still active?”

Tankersley: “Affirmative. Active threat. And we can’t identify it. It’s like a huge insect. Self replicates its body. It has two faces. We have no weapons on board, so it shredded through most of our crew. We tried decoupling Ring One, but the things seem to be able to self replicate. We’re sealed up in ring three until they find us. The remaining rings are without oxygen, and the only access to us now is through the utility shafts.”

“May I speak?” Hofnitz asked, approaching behind Kyle.

“Permission granted,” Kyle said.

Hofnitz: “Officer, are there any injuries among the survivors?”

Tankersley: “Almost all of them.”

Hofnitz: “And your medical supplies?”

Tankersley: “They’re in Ring Five.”

Kyle: “Alright Ragnarok. We’re coming. Do you have any images of the threat? Our radios are locked onto yours, transmit away.”

Tankersley: “I… I can send some surveillance footage. Transmitting now.”

Prometheus projected her usual holographic wrap-around screen, and on it was The Ragnarok’s surveillance footage. In this footage, the Medusas got their first look at the monster that had destroyed The Ragnarok.

The beast was huge, and did indeed look like a large spider, save for having 12 legs instead of eight. It was approximately 14 feet wide by 20 feet long by 10 feet high. The beast was a pale yellow color, and rather than having a front and back end, it had a face both front and back, with two enormous, fisheye lens-like black eyes making it unlikely that the thing had a single blindspot. At the beast’s two front ends were a set of long arms, which ended in spiked, crab-like claws. The footage showed the monstrosity as it ripped through some large room on The Ragnarok, cutting down the crew with its claws as though they were made of wet tissue paper.

“Fucking hell,” Jack breathed. Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw Joshie crossing himself, a gesture he rarely indulged in publicly.

“Alright,” Kyle said, taking charge, “this is no longer a strike, it’s a rescue operation. We get those people out, and then we blow that ship the fuck up. Demeter, how are your supplies?”

“Insufficient for 36 people,” Hofnitz said. Kyle paused for a moment, strategizing.

Kyle: “Alright. Demeter, grab everything you can carry in one rucksack, and bring an extra one. We’re going to head for Ring Five and get all we can.”

Kyle turned back to the radio console.

Kyle: “You said you have synthetics on board; how many and do they have medical skills?”

Tankersley: “Five of them. Yes, they can perform basic medical functions.”

Kyle: “Alright. Send them to your medical facility. I’m coming down with two of my people. We’re getting you out of there. Okay, Prometheus out.”

“So who gets to go down?” Kovac asked, seeming almost hopeful.

“Not you. Not this time,” Kyle said with a smile, “Demeter and Hades. Grab your gear, you’re coming with me.”

“Why you? Why them?” Jack demanded.

“Because,” Kyle said, “I can go through the depressurized compartments and through the vents without a helmet or an air filter, which are too big for those vents. I need her to stitch people up, and I need him to stand guard and gun down whatever follows us. Taking more is unnecessary risk.”

Everyone half shrugged. Much as they might be eager for action, it was difficult to argue with Kyle’s logic. Jack waved loosely in approval, and so Kyle, Franz, and Hofnitz gathered their weapons, with Franz and Hofnitz putting on their helmets. Kyle left his off, and the three proceeded to the small airlock at the front end of the starboard side tube containing Prometheus’s left engine.

“You really don’t need a helmet, eh?” Franz said, looking slightly unnerved as the group waited for the internal pressure seal to engage so that the trio could exit Prometheus.

“No, I don’t,” Kyle said flatly.

The outer airlock door opened, and Kyle, Hofnitz, and Franz exited. Even for Kyle, there were always a few seconds of terrible nausea for the first few seconds after stepping into a Zero G environment. But the nausea passed, and the trio set off

towards The Ragnarok, the plasma jets on their suits propelling them, and even turning at angles with them, the neural interface within the suits moving with them in lock step.

"Alright ladies," Kyle said, "we head for Ring Five. Fourth from the top now. Let's hope there's a way in."

"And if there's not?" Franz asked.

"Then we enter one of the lower or higher rings and work our way through the station," Kyle said, less confident than he sounded.

As the trio glided towards The Ragnarok, Kyle got a telepathic message, in Prometheus's unmistakable "voice."

Prometheus: "Captain, I've seen these creatures before."

Kyle: "Have you now? When?"

Prometheus: "Many cycles ago. My first ever Captain fought them. She named them "Terrormorphs."

Kyle: "Where do they come from? And what's the best way to kill them?"

Prometheus: "The men who made them flew this flag."

With that, Prometheus projected an image into Kyle's head of a flag. His proverbial heart sank when he saw it was the unmistakable flag of The Orion Syndicate.

Prometheus: "You'd best get out before they decide to come rescue their babies."

Kyle: "No shit. What is their weakness?"

Prometheus: "Extreme heat and radiation. Plasma should be effective."

Kyle: "Why didn't you say before?"

Prometheus: "I'm not certain really. I suppose I should have."

Kyle: "Yes, you fucking well should."

The trio reached the ring of The Ragnarok they sought. It was about half a mile in diameter, and so it took a bit before finding

an external door, but at last they did so. Kyle jetted towards it and pulled on the lever beside it. Nothing happened.

"Shit! Goddamn it! There's no power!" Kyle shouted in frustration. "We'll have to find another-"

"Pull back!" Hofnitz screamed, cutting Kyle off.

Kyle glanced up. Almost perfectly camouflaged, lying in wait to strike, was one of the creatures which Prometheus had said were called "Terrormorphs." The thing opened its four pronged monstrous mouth, reaching out with its clawed arms. Only Kyle's superhuman reflexes saved him as he launched himself backwater from the side of The Ragnarok. One of the plasma jets on Kyle's suit grazed the Terrormorph's claw, but seemed to cause it only the slightest irritation before it lunged into space.

Kyle grabbed his rifle and fired at the monster's black, opaque eyes. At this, the beast withdrew its eyes into its body, and began rotating itself, both sets of arms flailing wildly as it half roared, half screamed in chilling primal rage. Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw Franz thumb the selector switch on his rifle, switching to the under-barrel grenade launcher.

"Motherfucker!" Franz bellowed, pulling the trigger and launching a grenade right into the Terrormorph's open mouth.

Had the Terrormorph been the usual kind of creature the Medusas had faced, say a large Martian spider, then a plasma grenade launched to inside the body would have practically vaporized it from the inside out, leaving only a few charred pieces behind. The Terrormorph, on the other hand, merely had a hole about the size of a softball blown in its top. A blob of thick green blood came out, bubbling and steaming for a few seconds before inevitably freezing solid. The Terrormorph's limbs went limp, leaving its body to drift into space.

"Motherfucker?" That's the best line you could come up with?" Hofnitz said incredulously.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Franz quipped.

“Alright, focus,” Kyle chuckled, “that was too close. I want to try something.”

Kyle turned, pointing his gun at the now dead Terrormorph, right where the thing’s legs met its body, and fired. It took several shots, but the leg detached.

“Neat trick,” Franz said, “so we aim for the legs.”

“Exactly,” Kyle said, “now let’s move.”

Kyle, Franz, and Hofnitz resumed their drift, and were fortunate enough to find a fairly large hole in the top of Ring Five, which they very cautiously lowered themselves into, their eyes darting to and fro.

The trio found that on the inside, the Ragnarok was surprisingly sleek in appearance for a mining vessel. The floors were shiny and white, and the whole hallway they stood in had once been lit by long lightstrips which blended seamlessly into the architecture. All the rooms which opened onto the hallway did so by way of motion activated sliding doors, or at least they once had, back when there was power. On one wall was a handy map of the Ring.

“Alright,” Hofnitz said, examining the map, “this Ring is divided into four sectors. We’re in the offices.”

“Medical is to the right,” Kyle finished, “let’s not keep those synthetics waiting. Loose three point formation.”

And so Kyle, Franz, and Hofnitz moved down the hallway, in the “loose three point formation” Kyle had ordered, that is to say a wide triangle, which attempted to cover all angles. This was fairly impossible in a constantly curving space, but it was doubtless more secure than moving in a straight ahead formation. It wasn’t terribly long before they reached a wide sliding door to an internal airlock, separating the offices quarter of the Ring from the medical facilities quarter. The doors didn’t slide

open automatically, but fortunately for the trio, there was a manual override lever. Once through the airlock, the three were quite jolted by the discovery that the gravity was still operating in this sector.

The medical facility looked like how medical facilities always look in these sorts of places; white, sterile, and mostly soulless, save for a few posters on the wall, some decorative, others informative, such as one poster urging miners to not lay their bare hands on rocks they'd mined unless said rocks had been sterilized. Someone had scribbled over this poster with the simpler message; "Hands off the rocks, don't lose your cocks!"

Hurriedly rushing to and fro in the medical facility were the five synthetics which Tankersley had sent at Kyle's instruction. They certainly weren't Arasaka products, based on their appearance. Rather than being human passing and unique, these synthetics were all identical, and their skin was more like a shell of some kind of white plastic-like material, with two camera lenses for eyes, and a small circular speaker for a mouth. The synthetics wore odd jumpsuits of a light orange rubbery material with many pockets.

"Greetings gents," Kyle said, "I'm Kyle, meet Frida and Franz, continue gathering whatever you can carry. Is there away I can communicate with the other survivors?"

"Right this way, Mr. Kyle," said one synthetic, leading Kyle into one room.

"What should I do?" Franz asked, looking rather sheepish as the only one present who wasn't occupied.

"Secure the perimeter as much as you can, we move out in three," Kyle ordered briskly.

The synthetic led Kyle into what seemed to be a security booth type room, with several CCTV screens set above a large

black console. The screens were all blank, but the keys on the console were still lit up, indicating it still had power.

"Thank you, I'll take it from here," Kyle said, waving away the synthetic, who gave a nod and left.

Kyle turned to the console, and with his innately programmed tech knowledge, he was quickly able to access the intercom. A screen in the center of the console switched on, and this Kyle used to choose the location to which he'd speak in the intercom. Choosing Ring Four, he spoke.

Kyle: "Acting Second Officer Tankersley, do you read me? This is Captain Dellschau once again."

Tankersley answered almost instantly.

Tankersley: "Captain Dellschau, yes I read you loud and clear. We're losing people up here, we need those medical supplies!"

Kyle: "Understood. Where exactly do we find you?"

Tankersley: "Storage block B, Ring Five. The toasters will show you. Make sure to reengage any pressure seals. I assume you have a plan?"

Kyle: "Of sorts. We're going to scuttle the ship and haul ass. Dellschau out."

With that, Kyle returned to the others. Hofnitz and most of the synthetics stood around with stuffed bags of medical supplies. A moment later, Franz appeared from wherever he'd gone, securing the perimeter.

"Alright," Kyle said, "let's move out. How do we get to Storage Block B, Ring Five?"

"Right this way please," one of the synthetics said, turning with a beckoning wave.

The synthetic led Kyle, Franz, Hofnitz, and the other synthetics down several hallways in the medical quarter to an open elevator shaft, and then promptly stepped into said

elevator shaft. The gravity inside the shaft was clearly not functioning, and so into it stepped the remainder of the party. Within the shaft, on every level, there was a narrow ledge on either side of where the elevator sat, and coming off of each ledge was a narrow, pressure sealed door. To the left side ledge on the level below is where the first synthetic descended, with Kyle and Franz stepping out after him. They were greeted by the sound of clicking up above. Kyle looked up to see a small Terrormorph in the shaft high above, which began bounding down the shaft on the attack.

"Hostile above!" Kyle barked, and he and Franz raised their rifles, firing at the joints where the Terrormorph's legs met its body, severing each leg with a few shots each. The beast, still alive but now powerless, tumbled past down the shaft, screaming in rage and terror.

The front synthetic inserted an electronic key into a port next to the pressure-sealed door, which slid open, revealing a claustrophobically narrow hallway, both walls lined with wiring and pipes, occasionally broken by blank panels. It ended in another pressure-sealed door. A service hallway. The lead synthetic beckoned, and Kyle, Franz, Hofnitz, and the remaining service synthetics entered the little hallway, with the synthetic in the rear sealing up the pressure door behind them, creating an airlock before the next segment was opened up. And so they continued, compartment to compartment, for what seemed like an interminable number of compartments. At one point the group felt vibrations caused by something heavy moving in the room on the other side of the compartment.

"Do you think it can sense us?" Hofnitz asked, no doubt not realizing she was thinking aloud.

"Yes, if you keep running your fucking mouth!" Kyle hissed.

The Terrormorph apparently didn't sense them, however, and appeared to move on, at which point Kyle telepathically ordered the group to remain still and silent for several minutes. He realized that he didn't know enough about these creatures to be sure they weren't intelligent enough to set an ambush or simply pause to make sure that it heard what it thought it heard before attacking. This one apparently wasn't, and so after several minutes, Kyle moved the group forward. At last, they reached the final compartment, wherein the front synthetic inserted the same key into one of the ports in the wall, and one of the large, blank panels popped loose, revealing it to be a door, which the synthetic pushed open, at last freeing all from the claustrophobic halls.

The compartment door opened into what seemed to be a sprawling storage room, likely making use of "basement universe" technology, as there was no way a room of this size could have fit into one of The Ragnarok's fairly narrow rings. Two large sets of double doors stood at either side of the room, both piled high with crates. At the far wall someone had rigged together a few computers and radios, from where Tankersley had presumably been broadcasting.

"Neat trick," Kyle muttered, echoing Franz's remark earlier, before surveying the room.

In total, Kyle saw 35 survivors, not including his group. 34 human, one synthetic. Most of them were bulky men in work clothes, whom Kyle assumed were miners, as he assumed were the few women dressed like them. Aside from the miners were four or five people in blue jumpsuit uniforms, all men except one slight woman with light brown hair who approached Kyle upon his entry.

"Acting Second Officer Tankersley, I'd assume?" Kyle said his hand outstretched.

“Yes,” Tankersley replied with a slight smile.

“I see. Well you’re not in good shape here, are you?” Kyle said, looking over the room where he saw not a single uninjured person, and quite a few who were visibly on the way out.

“No, we are not,” Tankersley said.

“Just what the fuck happened? How did those things get on board?” Kyle asked.

“Well,” Tankersley said, “we cracked a planet as we usually do. All our scans showed no life on it. But after the cracking, one of the miners in his shuttle saw a big black egg shaped object in the debris, and in keeping with company policy, he brought it in and we quarantined it. But the egg opened, and one of those things came out and started replicating, and here we are. What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to get all of you out of here, and then we’re going to scuttle the ship,” Kyle stated, “give me a moment to think.”

And without waiting for Tankersley to “give” him a moment, Kyle stepped aside, thinking of options. There weren’t many, but few is better than none, and after a moment, Kyle went to Hofnitz, who was moving from injured person to injured person, mending them as best as possible in 30 seconds or less.

“We’re going to have to space everyone,” Kyle said flatly, “do you have enough oxypens?”

Hofnitz looked up in shock.

“Well yes,” Hofnitz said after a moment, “but I don’t see-“

“Then be getting them out. That’s an order,” Kyle said, and then returned to Tankersley.

Kyle: “Where’s the nearest window?”

Tankersley: “There’s a big one in the room next to this one. Why?”

Kyle: “Do you have flashlights? Flares? Anything that could be used as a signal?”

Tankersley: “We have flares. Should I get you one?”

“Please. Now, am I still able to reach my ship with this thing you’ve set up?” Kyle asked, gesturing at the rigged device.

Tankersley showed Kyle the operation of the rigged device, and Kyle hailed Prometheus.

Kyle: “Prometheus, this is Daedalus, transmitting from aboard The Ragnarok, come in Prometheus.”

Almost instantly, Jack answered.

Jack: “This is Ares. What’s going on down there?”

Kyle: “Too long to explain. I need you to send out a shuttle to Ring 5, look out for a window with a flare in it. Whoever flies the shuttle needs to bring one passenger, who’ll offload onto the station with me. Do you copy, Ares?”

Jack: “I copy.”

Kyle: “Good. You need to also be prepared to take survivors. Myself, Hades, and whoever you send down are going to scuttle the station. Tell Apollo to be prepared for immediate take-off once we’ve returned. We can’t let these things get taken away.”

Jack: “Copy, Daedalus. Good luck.”

Kyle: “Thank you. Ragnarok out.”

With that, Kyle took one last look over the room, then went and stood atop one of the crates, so he was now overlooking the room and spoke.

“Ladies and mostly smelly gentlemen, may I have your attention please?” Kyle called out, and as expected, the bit of levity lightened the mood enough to induce the room’s inhabitants to pay attention as he continued; “As you may have all noticed, we’re not in the best condition. So here’s what’s going to happen; some friends of mine are going to come in a shuttle and pick you all up.”

A cheer went up at this.

“Very good,” Kyle said, “here’s the catch. To get picked up, you’re going to have to all be without air for a minute or so. And probably without gravity. As space station workers, I’m sure you’re all trained for that. Now, I’m seeing that some of you are in very bad shape. I’d never ask you to make the unthinkable choice, but-“

“No man left behind!” one miner shouted, and a chorus of agreement went up, which made Kyle smile.

“Alright then. My friend told me you were tough bastards. Now, I need ideas; how do I scuttle the ship?” Kyle asked.

One officer, a tall man with pronounced Mediterranean features, waved Kyle over, and so he went, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Hofnitz was already preparing the oxypens, and directing the synthetics to do the same.

“I can think of one way,” the officer explained to Kyle; “There’s two doors in the barrel of the gun. If those were blocked, then the gun would fire backwards, and because it’s a compressed star, it would trigger a small supernova. Problem is, to fire the gun, you and another have to be standing at the console and operating. You’d be vaporized.”

“Not necessarily,” one miner who stood nearby, said. “There’s the cool down.”

“Cool down?” Kyle asked.

“Yes!” the officer exclaimed, “That would work! The gun has a 12 minute cool down after it’s fired. But you can set it to fire again as soon as it’s fired the first time. So you could fire once, set to fire again, and during the cool down period, you block the barrel, haul ass out, and the station blows after you’re gone.”

“Fucking insane. I love it. Miner man, you’re a genius,” Kyle said, giving a pat on the shoulder to the miner who’d mentioned the cool down, whom Kyle noticed was no more than Max’s age.

The young officer reached into his pocket and pulled out a long silver key, then called Tankersley over, and she handed Kyle an identical key, explaining that these were necessary components in firing the gun, which he further gave directions to, as all the controls were located on Ring Seven, at the bottom of the station. One of the officers also handed Kyle one of the electronic keys which opened panels in the service tunnel at his request.

"I do have one order, Officer Tankersley," Kyle said before leaving; "Make sure the synthetics get on the shuttle. They're my brothers."

Leaving Tankersley and the others to figure out what that meant, Kyle reentered the service tunnel, giving a final nod to Hofnitz and the synthetics to begin administering the oxypens. Kyle went to the next compartment, and then out again through a service panel door, as he'd done to reach the survivors, finding himself in a long, blank hallway, the space facing side of which was one long window, presumably meaning this was an observation deck.

Outside, Kyle saw Prometheus's shuttle as he'd ordered, and thus he lit the flare, and whoever was piloting the shuttle flashed the shuttle's lights, indicating they'd seen. Kyle held the flare straight up and down, signaling for the shuttle to hold. Then at last, Kyle raised his rifle, and fired a grenade and a burst of shots at the long window. The window was made of durable stuff; it was designed to survive asteroid fields. But inevitably, the glass cracked, and the cracks inevitably began spreading across the glass, deepening before it shattered.

"Warning. Depressurization imminent. Seek shelter immediately or hold your breath and brace for vacuum," a robotic voice warned, and seconds later, the glass shattered.

The depressurization was intense, as it always is, but Kyle managed to hold in place with the help of his suit, and The Ragnarok's gravity held true, lessening the impact somewhat, and so without missing a beat, Kyle waved the shuttle down, then turned to the wall mounted intercom console on the wall.

"Brace for impact motherfuckers!" Kyle shouted into the intercom, then turned at last to the manual override panel beside the enormous door to the storage room where the survivors lay.

As the doors opened gradually, the depressurization was fairly calm. The miners came rushing past the door and various crates, holding their breaths, right as the shuttle's open back was presented to the window. The extra Medusa whom Kyle had requested bounded out, revealing himself to be Max.

The miners able-bodied enough to load onto the shuttle did so first, as did Hofnitz once Kyle had ordered her to, in no uncertain terms. The miners unable to walk were carried onto the shuttle two at a time by Kyle, Max, Franz, and The Ragnarok's synthetics, whom Kyle was happy to see did load onto the shuttle once all the survivors had. Of course, the shuttle was well beyond capacity, and standing room only or less, but somehow they managed. By necessity, the loading of the survivors took no more than two minutes, and with the shuttle gone, Kyle turned to Max and Franz, the three of them now once again wrapped in the deafening silence of space.

"Alright men," Kyle said, "we need to move our asses. Heracles, are you down to do something really stupid?"

"You know me. I'm always happy to do something really stupid," Max said with a schoolboy grin.

"That's my boy," Kyle said, "now-"

For what felt like the umpteenth time that day, the conversation was cut off, when the men heard the sound of movement up

above their heads, on the roof of the Ring. Just a few seconds later, not one, not two, not three, but four Terrormorphs of varying sizes had ripped a hole through the roof of the ring.

"Heracles, aim for the legs!" Kyle shouted, it being the only thing he had time to say.

The three men mangaged to successfully dismember the four Terrormorphs with their guns mostly. At one point a Terrormorph did succeed in grasping Max in one of its sets of claws, but Max just managed to whip out his Arasaka sword and cut off these claws, then back away and shoot its limbs off.

"Alright," Kyle said, "let's continue this discussion on less solid ground."

Max and Franz didn't need to be told twice, and so all three jetted from the destroyed window, eventually hovering in space about 100 yards from The Ragnarok before continuing. Here, Kyle laid out the full plan; first, the men would head into the debris field which was forming into a loose orbit around The Ragnarok, likely pulled in by its compressed star and artificial gravity. From this debris field, which contained not only ship pieces, but also large rock chunks from the planet which the Ragnarok had cracked, the men would retrieve a rock or other piece of indestructible debris which could be used to jam the gun's internal hatch, at which point the cool down plan would be carried out at last.

"I can go for the debris," Max said, "you two can get to the gun and get it ready. Permission requested, Sir."

"Alright. Permission granted," Kyle said, "but I'm afraid I'll need your gun's charge pack. Hades and myself are running a bit tight on ammo, and you don't need it where you're going."

With a resigned sigh, Max unloaded his gun, handing the charge pack to Kyle, and set off for the debris field. Kyle looked

on after him in fatherly pride for a few seconds, then returned his attention to Franz.

"Alright Kid," Kyle said, "let's blow this shit up."

"Yes Sir," Franz said, and he and Kyle jetted off again, back to The Ragnarok.

Kyle and Franz were heartened to see that Ring 7 was essentially intact, at least from the outside, and a peek into the few small windows indicated that it was unharmed inside as well. Less heartening was the fact that Ring 7 had no external entryways. Kyle thought for a moment about blowing open the side with a grenade, but then thought better of it. Not only would he not know what he was shooting, but there was always the possibility that depressurizing the Ring might induce The Ragnarok's computer to shut down the gun's operation.

"Alright, you know the drill," Kyle said, "up a level we go."

And so Kyle and Franz ascended to the outside of Ring 6, and here they found a hole ripped in the top, through which they descended. Ring 6 was, it turned out, a hydroponic garden, made up of row upon row of trees and plants, growing various fruits and vegetables, watered by overhead sprinklers and lit by grow lights, all now frozen solid from their exposure to space of course.

"Watch it," Kyle said, "it would be really easy for one of those things to hide in here."

"Where are we going?" Franz asked.

"The elevator, unless we see a shaft or something earlier," Kyle said, "walk slow and keep your eyes open."

Very slowly, Kyle and Franz crept through the hydroponic garden, guns raised, keeping to the wall whenever possible, so that at least their backs were protected. One small Terrormorph did emerge, camouflaged in the greenery, and was dealt with easily. For the first time, Kyle was able to observe the death of a

Terrormorph in a temperature-controlled environment, as himself and Franz had entered a sealed sector. Here, he saw that the Terrormorph's blood was extremely hot- hot enough to melt the grating on the floor of the Ring.

Kyle and Franz did eventually find a service shaft leading downward, which they entered by way of one of the usual panels opened with the small electronic key. Kyle kept this key, along with the ones for the gun, in a closed pocket in his armor, which was more like a locked box. These armor suits had several of these, which could be used to store ammunition, knives, etcetera. It was one of Kyle's favorite features.

Ring 1, it turned out, was essentially a massive bridge and control center, with row upon row of seemingly endless consoles and computer desks, seemingly all undamaged and most having lights on, indicating they still functioned. Atop one desk, a digiphone still played, broadcasting of all things, Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love with You," the same song Kyle had heard on his first night at Camp Hero.

"Sorry Elvis," Franz said, raising his gun to the digiphone. Kyle dove and ripped the gun from Franz's hand. In doing so, he discovered that Franz was a good deal more enhanced than he'd realized, as it was a momentary struggle for Kyle to grab the gun.

"Put that gun away you testosterone-addled fucking oaf!" Kyle exclaimed, realizing as he said it the irony of it being him to say such a thing.

"What if they hear the music?" Franz asked irritatedly.

"Good point," Kyle said, then went and smashed the digiphone, with his fist rather than with a gun, "and now you won't be depressurizing the Ring."

Kyle handed Franz his gun back, and the two men went forward, a moment later hearing a voice on their comms.

“I’m back,” Max said over the comm link, “I got lots of shit to put in the barrel. Awaiting your orders Daedalus.”

“Copy. Stand by Heracles, and keep away from the gun until I say so,” Kyle said.

Kyle and Franz reached the console from which the gun was operated. At each end of the long black console was a keyhole, placed far enough apart so that a single person couldn’t operate the gun by themselves. Kyle took out the two long silver keys and handed one to Franz. They inserted each key into its respective keyhole, and on Kyle signal, they turned the keys simultaneously, and were greeted by the keys and screens on the console lighting up.

“Gun online. Initiate firing procedure,” a robotic voice said from the console.

“Alright. Let’s see how this works,” Kyle said, stepping behind the console.

As one might expect, operating the gun was a rather complicated procedure. To begin, it was necessary to align the gun with a target, using the camera views on the screens which ran across the top of the console, which involved steering it and positioning it via several dials. Kyle aimed it towards the decoupled Ring 1, which still hovered relatively close to The Ragnarok. When the gun was aligned, a few keys had to be hit, confirming the target. At this, a small panel in the middle of the console slid open, revealing a large red button to fire the gun. Before firing, Kyle confirmed with Max.

Kyle: “Heracles, all clear?”

Max: “All clear, Daedalus.”

With that, Kyle fired the gun. While the blast couldn’t be seen from the console of course, a vibration did run throughout the Ragnarok.

“Alright,” Kyle said, “now to do that again and fast.”

By necessity, Kyle had realigned the gun I'm under 30 seconds and had told it to fire. As planned, it wouldn't right away.

"Unable to fire. Countdown to firing initiated," the computer said, and handily, a 12 minute countdown appeared on all the console's screens.

Kyle: "Alright Heracles, get into position. Block the bastard!"

Max: "Yes Sir!"

For a truly agonizing 30 seconds, Kyle and Franz waited before hearing from Max any further.

"Alright, I'm in the barrel. Approaching the hatch," Max said, "I'm now going to attempt to block it."

Kyle then heard the sound of Max's thrusting grunts for about one minute as he attempted to block the hatch in the barrel.

"Heracles, should we give you some privacy?" Franz quipped. Kyle laughed.

"Shut up you stupid bastard," Max said, and then a few seconds later added, "alright the hatch won't open now."

Kyle: "Alright Heracles, get the fuck out of there now. Return to Prometheus. Daedalus out!"

In near symbiosis then, Kyle and Franz left the console, fairly bolting to the nearest window, which they both fired a spray of gunshots into, and then leapt out of, jetting back to Prometheus as rapidly as their suits would allow. Kyle was relieved when he saw Max jetting with equal speed ahead of them, meeting him at the outer door of Prometheus's airlock. Kyle switched on his comm link again, connecting to David.

Kyle: "Apollo, open the airlock and get us out of here as soon as the door closes."

David: "You don't have to tell me twice Sir."

The outer airlock door opened, and the three men entered. The feeling of Prometheus in flight was felt instantly upon its closing, during that fairly few moments agonizing before one

can enter a ship proper as an airlock repressurizes. But those moments passed, and at last, Kyle stepped through, being greeted by Jack and Hofnitz.

"Alright," Kyle said, "back to Mars then. Are the survivors comfortable?"

"They're quarantined in the shuttle bay," Hofnitz said.

"And we're not heading to Mars," Jack added, "we're heading for The Ixchel."

Kyle: "What the fuck is an Ixchel? Wait, more importantly; Demeter, why the quarantine?"

Hofnitz: "I'm sure you noticed that some of the miners had what seemed to be chemical burns?"

Kyle: "Of course."

Hofnitz: "Those aren't chemical burns. One of those things got pretty torn up in some mining equipment which those miners tried attacking it with. Those aren't chemical burns Daedalus. They're from the alien's blood, and we don't know what pathogens they have or who's at risk if exposed."

Jack: "And to answer your other question; the Ixchel is a hospital ship, only a few systems away. They have tanks and sterilization equipment. We should be there in 10 minutes or so, if Apollo is to be believed."

Kyle: "And how are we to afford this hospital ship?"

Jack: "We should have enough money for the basics."

Kyle: "Well, then I need to announce all this and more."

With that, Kyle bypassed the others, returning to the main ship, reaching the bridge where most of the Medusas stood or sat. Kyle got something of a hero's welcome, which lifted his mood before he took to Prometheus's intercom, where he sent out a ship wide announcement of the coming destination, followed by a short report on the successful destruction of The Ragnarok.

“You did good today. All of you did. Be happy for your lives. Signing off,” Kyle finished, then turned and left the bridge once again, heading to the “core room.”

“Welcome, Captain,” Prometheus said cheerfully.

“Greetings,” Kyle said, “but this isn’t a social call.”

Kyle explained to Prometheus about the possible pathogen, and further explained that she would have to be boarded by a sterilization team. Prometheus was familiar with the concept, and so was hardly enthusiastic, but she understood. Kyle’s briefing ended right as David’s voice came on the intercom.

David: “Alright everyone. We’re arriving, you should all probably be on deck.”

Kyle left the “core room,” meeting several Medusas in the hallway, who all proceeded to the bridge, getting their first proper glimpse of the hospital station known as The Ixchel.

The Ixchel, it turned out, was a massive all-white wheel, off of which came three branches, each branch itself ending in their own wheels. Each wheel had a glass dome covering the several skyscrapers per wheel. On the tops of each spoke was a row of spikes topped by metal spheres. Some kind of detection array for incoming craft, Kyle supposed. The Ixchel orbited a small Earth-like planet which Kyle didn’t recognize it, at least not from upper orbit. Almost immediately, Prometheus announced she was being hailed, and Kyle gave his consent for the transmission as himself, Jack, and for a momentarily unapparent reason, Tsurabaya approached the front of the bridge to communicate.

“Prometheus, this is The Ixchel, you’re not cleared for a landing here,” a young man’s voice said.

Kyle: “This is Captain Kyle Dellschau. Understood. We have a medical emergency on board.”

Young Man: “What is the nature of your emergency?”

Jack: “Life threatening injuries and… a possible alien contagion. We have around 35 patients.”

Young Man: “To whom am I speaking now?”

Jack: “This is Commander Jack Flynn. Myself and Officer Yoshiro Tsurabaya here have the needed credits.”

“Credits?” Kyle wondered, “Weren’t we going to be paying in cash?”

A pause of about 30 seconds.

Young Man: “Yes, looks like you’re both cleared alright. Dock your ship, prepare to be boarded and to have your DNA identification checked before you can leave the ship, and after prepare to be cleaned up. Ixchel out.”

With that, David navigated Prometheus to the underside of The Ixchel, revealing that the underside was all silver. In the middle of the bottom part of the central wheel was an open hatch, the inside of the ship protected from space by one of he usual force fields which David expertly guided Prometheus through, into a sleek gray landing area for shuttles and small ships, which he set Prometheus down in, then opened the shuttle bay door.

“Weapons down, identification out, people. I hope you know the drill by now,” Kyle ordered, then turned to Jack and Tsurabaya; “What’s all this about credits?”

“Well, you know all those private missions I was doing when you first knew me? I got a fuckload of credits for that,” Jack explained, and Tsurabaya gave much the same explanation, adding; “We thought it better to use credits than our unit’s coffers.”

Not two minutes after landing, Prometheus was boarded by a hoard of medical personnel in all white hazmat suits. To start, these personnel entirely bypassed the survivors and headed for the bridge. One of the personnel, a woman carrying a small

computer with a transparent flash-drive-esque device jutting from the side, asked Jack and Tsurabaya to approach her. Once they had, she took the flash-drive-esque device from the little computer, and held the formerly plugged in side to Jack's Carotid Artery, and the device promptly drew a tiny speck of blood, at which point the woman plugged it back into the computer, and a moment later withdrew it again and did the same to Tsurabaya.

"You're clear for credit claims," the woman said, then promptly turned and left, allowing the actual medical personnel to enter.

"Okay," said a tall, auburn haired man in the front, "I'm Dr. Macalister, I'm to oversee all of you. Is anyone on bridge showing signs of infection?"

"No, Doctor," Hofnitz said, "I'm medical officer Hofnitz by the way."

"We'll have time for names later," Dr. Macalister said tersely, "alright, follow me."

And so the Medusas followed Dr. Macalister off of Prometheus, seeing that the injured were already being loaded onto hovering stretchers with glass lids to cover them. The Medusas, and the synthetics from The Ragnarok it turned out, were not loaded onto stretchers. Rather, they were directed to a pair of doors leading off the hangar bay by Dr. Macalister.

Macalister: "Right then, head through those doors. Men to the right, women to the left, once you're inside take off your suits and any undergarments, then onto the disinfection room. Everyone get in a pod and wait to be disinfected, then wait again to be handed some clothes and follow the instructions given after that. Good luck."

And with that, Dr. Macalister took off, leaving the Medusas and the Ragnarok synthetics to fend for themselves.

“I’m not sure where we fall on the sexual classification scale,” one of The Ragnarok’s synthetics said, earning a good laugh from the Medusas.

“Come with us, you can be honorary men today,” Joshie said good-naturedly, giving the confused synthetic a hearty pat on the shoulder.

The synthetics seemed to accept this, and so marched with the Medusas forward through the door to the right off of The Ixchel’s hangar bay. Inside they found a long white hallway, with a single long bench running along one wall. Here the men stripped as they’d been told to do, then went through the other door at the ends of the hallway.

The room beyond proved to be row upon row of massive cylindrical pods, their glass fronts hanging open. These were at least 30 feet in diameter by approximately 15 feet in height, obviously meant to be able to cleanse large aliens.

As instructed, the men and synthetics took a pod each. The pods sealed closed, and the occupants were greeted by a shower of a brutally cold, light blue substance which coated every inch of the body, fortunately followed up quite quickly by a merciful downpour of hot water, which washed off all of the strange blue substance. This was at last followed by the usual sonic treatment, which knocked all drops of moisture off the body. The pods remained closed however.

“Please, remain in your pod,” a robotic voice said.

“Like I could leave it?” Kyle muttered.

A few minutes later, a hovering robotic cart entered the room from somewhere, bearing fresh clothes, which is to say gray sweatsuits and blue hospital booties. They were hardly dignified, but they were comfortable, and the Medusas were largely too exhausted to care beyond that. Once dressed, the men and

synthetics exited to the next room, with the female Medusas exiting from the pod room next door mostly simultaneously.

The next hallway was the first part of the station the Medusas encountered which seemed to match the glass and ivory futurism of the outside of the Ixchel. This hallway's floor was light panels, which lit up as one stepped on them, though the halls were quite sufficiently lit already by lightstrips on the ceiling and lights from the glass fronted rooms which faced onto the hallway, a glance at which revealed them to be glass fronted hospital ward rooms, each with airlocks for entry and a small bathroom on the end. A woman, again in hazmat gear, stood in the hall.

"Follow me please," was all she said, leading the Medusas and the Ragnarok synthetics down the hall quite a long ways, to a pair of ward rooms facing each other, where once again the men and women were split.

"There's an intercom on the wall," the woman explained, "if any of you begin showing symptoms of anything, use it. You'll also find a system by which you may order food. I hope all else is self explanatory. Make yourselves comfortable, you may be here quite some time."

"At least she's honest," one of the Ragnarok synthetics quipped, earning a general chuckle.

The Medusas thus entered their assigned wards, where there were fortunately at least enough beds, quite comfortable as it transpired. Kyle was, privately, feeling the slightest touch of panic in the back of his mind. Not for any real reason; he just hated being behind glass. After his experience with it on first waking up from the vat, it was the one thing which made him feel slightly helpless, though a slight tap on the ward's glass revealed it was hardly comparable to the glass which had held Kyle prisoner at the Arasaka plant.

The woman's warning about waiting had been quite apropos, it turned out. The Medusas waited for at least six hours before anyone came for them. Fortunately, each ward had a television with several channels and a number of video games which the men played. Less pleasant was the single toilet for eight men, but it was livable. To order food, one used a touchscreen menu built into the wall, and a few minutes later, the screen would slide up, revealing whatever dish had been ordered, deposited on a conveyor belt system running ward to ward. This food apparently came from a replicator, but one of the highest quality, as the dishes were indistinguishable from the real thing.

Eventually, of course, Dr. Macalister made his return, still in hazmat gear, and carrying a glass pad. From the hall, he beckoned the Medusas and synthetics out, and they eagerly exited, waiting for his pronouncements with bated breath, particularly once they saw that behind him were a long row of suited personnel, bearing more glass pods, these ones with wheels on the bottom.

Macalister: "Well, ladies and gents, I'm glad you had the sense to come here. We took biopsies from a few areas affected by the alien's blood. All the contact points tested positive for an unknown infectious bacteria."

Hofnitz: "What are the symptoms?"

Macalister: "That's yet to be determined. The samples are being isolated for further analysis. Your armor has been sterilized, and you all get a dip in the tank. We can't determine that none of the bacteria has entered you internally."

Kyle: "What about me and these other synthetics?"

Macalister: "Again, it's a new alien bacteria that we know nothing about. On the business subject; after your trip through the tank, all the KBMG employees and synthetics will be leaving. There's already a ship waiting for them. The rest of you will

have to wait 36 hours or more while your ship is cleansed. You'll be given meal and hotel voucher cards for your stay. Now, into the pods please."

As instructed, Kyle and the others entered the pods. In these mobile pods, no liquid poured down on the occupant of course, nor was one required to take off one's clothes. One simply stepped in, and once sealed inside, one was pitched back to a rather uncomfortable angle as the pod was tilted to be wheeled to the next location, which proved to be a bank of industrial sized elevators, which ascended several levels.

The elevator arrived in, as the reader no doubt expects, yet another airlock, beyond which was a megalithic sized sleek white room, filled with a veritable city of regeneration tanks, and many personnel in their white hazmat suits moving to and fro about the place. The woman who'd pushed and pulled Kyle's pod stopped in front of one regen tank, then rounded his pod and instructed him to take off his clothes, exit, and head for the tank.

"Damn. I don't even have to buy you a drink first?" Kyle said flirtatiously as he slipped off his pants. The woman didn't respond of course, having likely heard this joke multiple times a day.

Kyle exited the pod, then went up the usual steps adjacent to the tank, up to the usual human shaped metal frame suspended on a long hydraulic arm from the ceiling, which he stepped into, and as expected, it lifted him up, then slowly lowered him into the tank filled with its white fluid, and the deep, ambrosial slumber which the fluid induced. As always, this ended far too soon, with the metal frame once again lifting the patient, this time out of the tank and back to the little staircase down to the ground. Upon return to the staircase, Kyle found his armor waiting, which he slipped into, looking around and seeing the

other Medusas doing the same. He also saw that the Ragnarok synthetics were back in their orange jumpsuits already and being lead from the regen tank room, never to be seen by Kyle again.

Kyle descended the steps next to the tank once dressed, and the Medusas regrouped, being met by a member of the Ixchel's personnel, who handed them red cards, embossed with a watermark image of the station. These were their vouchers for meals, transport, and the hotel they'd be staying at.

From the regen tank room, Kyle and the others, following directions, went down several hallways, to yet another of the industrial sized elevators, which ascended to a sprawling atrium, really a small indoor rainforest, which lead out onto the pedestrian streets in the center of the Ixchel, where stood perhaps 10 skyscrapers, above which of course was the dome.

These streets, it turned out, were essentially a resort town for the patients at the Ixchel who were here for prolonged treatment. There were luxury hotels, spas, swimming pools, a Ferris wheel- everything except alcohol and brothels, much to the disappointment of Kyle and the male Medusas.

What made up for this disappointment, almost, was the food. The food was of an extreme quality, even by the standards of the few luxury locations Kyle has been to before, particularly the large Brazilian style steakhouse, which served real steak, brought up from the planet which The Ixchel orbited.

The 36 hours passed fast enough, and most if not all of the Medusas were in their hotel rooms when the message came through on their wrist computers, along with instructions on how to return to the hangar bay.

"Did they hurt you my girl?" Kyle asked as he boarded Prometheus.

“No Captain,” Prometheus said, “and I realized something; I’m starting to enjoy our adventures.”

Author’s note. A chapter serving several purposes, which I hope the discerning reader may recall when the time comes.

Chapter 9

As I continue this project and in this period, I realize that, much as I might wish to, I cannot write a detailed chapter about every mission which the Medusas carried out, and that such a thing would eventually become tiresome and repetitive. In this chapter, I'll thus describe a few missions that are slightly fuzzy in memory, both in their content and their chronology of Kyle's life, but which I consider interesting enough to include. In keeping with the theme of the previous chapter, I'll first tell of an operation at yet another space station which Kyle visited.

The mission started, as so many, at The Eagle's Claw. The Medusas were gathered around some board game or other- Kyle had taken to encouraging this among the Medusas, to reinforce the team bond. A trick he'd learned in his days as an instructor at Fort Worden. As the game was in progress, The Eagle's Claw's AI alerted the Medusas that Prometheus was receiving a transmission from Emmermann, and that only Kyle and Jack were invited.

"No cheating, you bastards," Kyle said as he and Jack left the group.

Kyle and Jack approached Prometheus, who dutifully let them aboard via the hangar bay, allowing them to make their way to the bridge, where Emmermann's visage filled half the room on the usual holographic wrap-around screen.

"Greetings gents," Emmermann said, "I'll get to the point. I want you two to sell yourselves."

Kyle: "Sell ourselves, Sir?"

Emmermann: “Like a pair of whores in 17th century Amsterdam.”

“May I ask what you’re actually asking of us, Sir?” Jack asked, turning pink with the effort of suppressing the chuckles Kyle couldn’t.

“Yes, quite,” Emmermann said, himself grinning, then went on to explain.

Kyle and Jack, by themselves, were to meet Emmermann and Georg the next day on the uncreatively named Jupiter Station, in order to partake in what Emmermann called “The Gun Show.” Here, they’d be essentially paraded around in front of both many aliens and elite Breakaway family heads, as a display of strength and to be marketed for hire. This was a semi-annual event, and Jack had apparently attended before, judging by his reaction.

“You’ll like the station, and not much else,” Jack advised; “Get laid tonight so you’re in a good mood.”

“Thanks for the concern,” Kyle laughed.

With the technical details laid out, which as usual I’ll not tell until they occur, Jack left Prometheus, Kyle staying behind with some excuse or other. In reality of course, he went straight to the “core room” to sexually interface with Prometheus. As she’d promised, she didn’t say no, and Kyle walked away entirely satisfied and in the best mood for the next day, a mood which he could only hope would last.

As he’d said he would, Emmermann did not send one of his usual shuttles. On this occasion, Emmermann came in one of his personal ships, which was a large, sleek, black affair which resembled a pyramid laid on its side, an iridescent Mjolnir embossed on the front hull. Emmermann landed his ship next to the lake, and Kyle and Jack approached, a boarding ramp already

lowering. Georg stood at the top, in dress uniform rather than the armor which Kyle and Jack wore, beckoning them aboard.

Emmermann's ship on the inside embodied Emmermann's taste in general; gauche, yet somehow tasteful. Each wall was covered in holographic posters of old European art, and at the ship's center was a tiny but complete holographic Chinese garden. The ship was also quite a good size- definitely larger than Prometheus. Kyle hadn't ever seen anything quite like it. After a short tour, Emmermann returned to the cockpit, and encouraged the men to take seats. It was going to be a bumpy ride through the Belt. Thus, Kyle, Jack, and Georg sat in the wide, comfortable bucket seats of one of the several seating compartments near the cockpit.

"He couldn't just "jump" the ship?" Kyle asked.

"He likes to show off," Georg said with a shrug.

The ride was, indeed, very bumpy. Kyle had his suspicions that this was intentional on Emmermann's part. It seemed unlikely that Emmermann couldn't have afforded stable gravity plates. The trip's first leg took about 30 minutes, then suddenly the movement of the ship stopped.

"Well boys. Come up front if you want the view of a lifetime," Emmermann said over the ship's intercom.

Emmermann's estimation of the view was, it turned out, not exaggerated. The positioning of the ship afforded a perfect view of Jupiter, at a close enough distance to make out details. There are no words to describe to those who've not experienced it the wonder of a gas giant. Indeed, even when one is directly experiencing it, it's difficult to believe it to be real, especially when one sees the planet's gases move and fluctuate in a rhythmic, cataclysmic dance on the surface of its spherical body. Even harder to believe is the size. While the gas giant always appears

impossibly large, it isn't until one approaches a point that one can grasp scale, which even then feels impossible.

"Wotan is glorious," Kyle thought aloud at the sight.

"You never quite get used to it," was Georg's contribution.

With the staring complete, Emmermann returned his attention to the controls, guiding the ship towards a spot on the planet, which turned out to be somewhere slightly north of the famous Red Spot. Having not seen Emmermann take off, Kyle hadn't had time to see that Emmermann wore a hearing aid-like device, wired into his seat, which served as the primary interface with the ship. This differed from Prometheus, as it was less advanced, which gave Kyle a slight swell of pride.

Emmermann descended the ship toward the tan and white dappled region north of the Red Spot. Here stood the uninventively named Jupiter Station, in all its glory. It was still quite a distance from the actual surface, but of course, on a Jupiter sized planet, it was invisible until one was beside it.

Jupiter Station was a massive white construction, consisting of a central cylinder, which narrowed into a narrow spike, which then blossomed again in a glass domed half-sphere. Off the bottom half of the wide cylinder were several dozen more long cylinders, extending in a pattern like spokes on a bicycle wheel, which ended in full spheres. It had a distinctively alien feeling to it, Kyle thought.

"The iguana folks built it," Emmermann said as if picking up on Kyle's thoughts, "then they gave it to our… old friends the Krugers."

Kyle glanced around the cockpit at this last comment. On Jack's face, he saw a flash of sadness. On Georg's face, he saw a glimpse of concern. On his own face, there likely passed a similar flash of concern. Of the few things he truly knew about Emmermann, it was that the Krugers were considered old

friends without hesitation. It could be nothing, or it could mean a political shift was on the horizon.

In any event, Emmermann aimed his ship towards Jupiter Station. At the bottom of the giant central cylinder, separated from the vacuum of space by several force fields, was one of the usual hangar bays which I've described many times. Kyle estimated this one to be about seven miles across, which explained the trams darting to and fro, taking people to and from their ships and the elevators which presumably lead up further into the station. One notable thing was that the staff seemed to still mostly consist of Iguanoids.

Kyle's regret as regards this operation was that he had no time or opportunity to explore much of the station, as he never returned. All that he did see left an impression, however, as an admirer of architecture. The sleek smoothness of the white walls in particular stood out and looked oddly familiar. It wasn't until he approached and rapped on one wall that he realized why. The entire structure of Jupiter Station was made of bone, meaning that it had either been grown, or the more chilling possibility, carved from some planet sized creature. The "glass" also had an oddly organic feeling. Kyle wondered in the back of his mind whether both of his hypotheses were wrong, and perhaps the station itself could be a living organism of some kind.

"The Gun Show" took place in the large half-sphere at the top of the central spire. On the trip up, Kyle at least had a glimpse of the inner workings of the station. Each level had a concourse, with the 2nd and 3rd levels having doors leading off to the branching cylinders which jutted from the lower levels of Jupiter Station. Judging by the number of alien species, all of which seemed to be congregating among themselves around these branching segments, Kyle deduced that every species must have

their own. The upper levels consisted mostly of restaurants and hotels, from the limited glimpses Kyle got.

"The Gun Show" was very boring indeed, by Kyle's estimation, and most of the other "guns" on display. The process of it all was like so; on one side of the room stood the soldiers on display, free to mingle with no food or drink dispensed. On the other side of the room, divided off by a velvet rope, the family heads of the colonies mingled, with their Kobe sashimi and champagne, talking among each other about their "guns," or their top soldiers, hoping to interest each other in hiring the other's private army. When one became interested, then they'd call over their soldier, and a deal would be struck. The one concession which the soldiers got was that they had a superior view of Jupiter from their side of the room.

While the evening was skull-numbingly dull, it did end up fruitful for the Medusas. As the top of essentially the entire civilization, Emmermann and his private army were of course highly in demand- for those who could afford it.

Among those able to afford was Gabriel Kruger, whom Kyle finally had the chance to meet properly. Kyle found Herr Kruger very quiet, for a man of his standing, but largely inoffensive. When Kruger and Jack glanced at each other, Kyle saw and detected the briefest flash of sadness, at some shared loss or other, he gathered. Perhaps Andrew, or perhaps not.

Another whom Kyle met and whom the Medusas were contracted to, whose interaction would pay off considerably later, was the Taiwanese interstellar real estate magnate who insisted on simply being called by his surname, Chan. He signed a contract to hire the Medusas for "land clearing" purposes.

Kyle also saw, but did not meet, two individuals who'd been in some way connected to his past operations, namely Ayoko Daishono of Daishono Cybernetics, and Giancarlo Vespucci of Kuiper

Belt Mining Group, the latter of whom Kyle thought must be what Pinocchio grew into after becoming a "real boy," judging by his appearance. Kyle also saw and waved at "Tío Bobby" Fernandes, whom he exchanged a wave with, but wasn't able to speak to.

There must have been others, but as the evening passed in such a dull fashion, the rest have not been particularly retained, and this was certainly not the only "Gun Show" which Kyle would attend. Only two other things occurred of note that evening. The first, only slightly notable, was that the evening's entertainment was a hyper-realistic hologram of Norma Jean Pierce, singing various songs, which Kyle didn't realize was a hologram until he saw someone walk through "her." He decided he'd look her up whenever the Medusas returned to Camp Hero. It had been too long.

The last notable occurrence was at some point when Kyle was standing looking out the window at Jupiter's Red Spot, from which he saw a ship emerge. Enormous, black, and roughly obelisk-shaped, Kyle realized it must have been thousands of miles long to be so plainly visible at distance.

Eventually, most everyone present either was too drunk to continue or they decided that they'd spend enough money for one party, and it all came to a gradual end. Emmermann was courteous enough to leave Kyle and Jack back at The Eagle's Claw, and then at last the whole odd affair of "The Gun Show" came to an end, clearly enough revealed to Kyle and, I hope, clearly enough to the reader.

The first real payoff of "The Gun Show" came perhaps a fortnight later. By this point, the Medusas had returned to Camp Hero, and were thus in their two little houses. In the interim period they'd done a single operation as a unit, in a small Japanese colony, doing an artifact retrieval of the sort I've described

many times, for Wang Yu Nong. The one slightly notable thing in the op was that in the colony, the Medusas had encountered a stray talking robot Golden Retriever. A cast out Arasaka product, it turned out.

"Are we going to find Fluffy a home?" Carina, the hater of animals, had asked sarcastically, by then fairly drunk from the bar crawl the Medusas had gone on to pass the night in the colony they were forced to spend before the spaceport opened.

"I'm fine," the dog had replied, "and further, that's a racial epithet."

As it happened, the group did find the dog a home. As he followed them down an alley, chatting about this or that, an old lady had peeked her head out, and been utterly awed and enamored by this talking dog, a thing most people of her standing would have only heard about but never seen. She'd offered to take the dog, and he'd been only too happy to oblige. Kyle had looked on, hoping that she wouldn't turn around and sell the novelty pet for the several million Neo-Yen which he must be worth.

The artifact retrieval itself was effortless and successful, and Wang Yu Nong was very pleased.

The payoff of "The Gun Show" came a bit later. It was early morning, and so the Medusa men were doing their usual; showering, shaving, eating breakfast, etcetera. Someone had stepped out to get something, and so when the doorbell rang, it was presumed that he'd forgotten his key. Thus, Tsurabaya, who'd just that moment exited the shower, went and answered the door still bare naked, which would've passed without note or comment had it actually been the whichever Medusa had stepped out who rang the bell. It wasn't, it turned out.

"Oh shit!" Tsurabaya exclaimed, "Gentlemen, we have company!"

As Tsurabaya and at least two others ran into the bedrooms to vainly attempt to regain their decency, the visitor entered, and Kyle and Jack rose to meet them. The visitors were two in number; one man and one woman, both assets of Kruger Mercenaries, judging by their prominent cybernetic protrusions. The man in particular was highly roboticized. The full left side of his body, at least what was visible, was all robotic, and the woman had a robotic left arm.

Once all the Medusas had been gathered, they were briefed on their job and eventual payment, the latter of which they were relieved to find was very generous, as the money by this point was running thin. The assignment, at least on the surface, was a routine rescue op, in the mountains of Kentucky, timeframe unknown, but likely not contemporary.

All arrangements had been made, presumably between a Kruger executive and Jimmy or some other high authority at Camp Hero, who had arranged the portal and the transport truck on the other side. The briefing completed, the Medusas geared up and went to the portal room. For Kyle and no doubt a few of the others, the use of the chair portal always stirred an odd sense which seemed to be some bizarre combination of dread and nostalgia. It was also always surreal for Kyle, seeing the Medusas who were oblivious to the room's significance, such as Kovac, Cheng, etcetera.

The operation was fairly short and bloodless, for the Medusa side anyway. Their task was to find three Kruger geneticists held captive in an Appalachian cave system several miles underground, where they were being held by an unknown alien or aliens.

The aliens, it turned out, were monstrous humanoid wolves. The females were mostly gray, the males mostly black, both sexes highly muscular and reflexively skilled to a remarkable

degree, with most being 8-12 feet in height. While certainly sentient, their civilization, if it could be called such, was at the Stone Age level, technologically speaking, which didn't at all dampen their savage fighting prowess, and had the Medusas not had on their armor, they'd have walked away quite cut up.

Kyle, in his usual way, felt a bit of a pang of guilt at eradicating an apparently civilian lot of aliens. He admired the Wolfmen's battle prowess and simplicity of life, not to mention their beauty. They were quite majestic creatures, particularly the alpha male, or king Wolfman, who stood at nearly 20 feet in height and whose fur was a light red rather than the grays and blacks of his compatriots, making him regally beautiful in a way Kyle hadn't ever quite seen.

One thing which stood out on this mission was that Kovac shone through. While Kyle had known her to be a more than competent fighter, the Wolfmen seemed to trigger a certain savagery in her, and she took down many with her bare hands. Until this point, Kovac and Max had been fairly antagonistic to one another. Now, Kyle caught Max looking on with something approaching respect.

Jack was also rather guilt-ridden at the attack on the Wolfmen, and thus quite sharply reprimanded one of the younger men when he was caught cutting a pelt.

The operation was a success, with both geneticists retrieved, and thus was unlocked yet another level of the Medusas work and roles; that of private contractors.

Author's note. Quite a short chapter, as the reader may have noticed. I wrote it to include three stories that, while perhaps not as detailed or high octane as many, I felt deserved an inclusion of some kind.

Chapter 10

The next incident which happened that I'd like to draw the reader's attention to began on Mars, like so many before it and so many more after it. It was dinner time, and Kyle and several others had just walked in and sat at the table, all having had their spirits lifted at The Glass Hub, from which they'd snatched a top quality bottle of Corelian, which was being passed around. The mood was excellent overall at the start. I believe the incident occurred sometime in 1995, though it's difficult to calculate.

Things shifted when Kyle received a transmission; not on his wrist computer, but to somewhere in the computer part of his brain, through a company uplink direct from Arasaka Headquarters. It was a function whose existence Kyle had only been peripherally aware of, and which had never been activated before now. The information in the transmission was incredibly shocking, and left Kyle in a stunned silence. His eyes roamed the table, and he saw that Tsurabaya was also sitting in stunned silence. One of his many augments must have been a similar uplink implant from his employers.

"Uncle Kyle, are you alright? You look as if you've seen a ghost," Cheng, who sat at Kyle's left, asked concernedly, bringing Kyle back to reality.

Kyle stood and addressed the Medusas.

Kyle: "Sorry to cut the fun short, but I think it's best we turn on the television."

Tsurabaya stood and moved to follow this directive, still looking rather dazed as he wordlessly left the room.

Max: “What the fuck is going on Dad?”

The Medusas followed Tsurabaya and Kyle’s lead into the living room of The Eagle’s claw, where Tsurabaya at last switched on the television. Within seconds, a news report cut in over the regular scheduled film which was playing. The middle aged blonde woman reporter stared at her teleprompter, visibly shocked as she gave the report.

Newscast: “This is just in. We are receiving a confirmed report that Shinji Arasaka, owner of cybernetics giant Arasaka Robotics, has been declared as permanently dead, after an apparent suicide in his office in Arasaka Tower, New Munich. More details to come, and may he rest in peace. Our hearts go out to all the Arasaka family.”

“Long live the Emperor,” Harune barely whispered, before being crowded by an uncharacteristically affectionate Max, which brought a slight smile to Kyle’s face.

“Well, holy fucking shit,” Jack said briskly, “back to business as usual until we receive orders.”

Nods went up all around, the shock beginning to wear off for most. Kyle went straight for Harune.

Kyle: “Are you alright, Little Boy Blue?”

Harune shrugged, then smiled.

Harune: “Fuck him, right? He didn’t raise me.”

“That’s my boy,” Kyle said, patting Harune on the shoulder, “come have some more Corelian.”

The evening resumed, of course now somewhat more subdued, until the orders inevitably came pouring in. Tsurabaya was first, receiving a message via wrist computer that he was to be at Neu Berlin Spaceport for pickup in six hours, by any means necessary, no questions asked.

“I suppose I’d better pack up and get there then,” Tsurabaya said with his signature carefree grin and chuckle.

“I’ll fly him over in one of the shuttles,” David said, standing.

“No, Joshie will,” Kyle cut in, “we may need you to take us all in Prometheus before you get back.”

And so, after Tsurabaya had packed his weapons and a few changes of clothing, he and Joshie left. The others simply waited, knowing instinctively that it was a matter of time. They were correct; perhaps two hours passed before The Eagle’s Claw’s AI alerted the Medusas that they were being contacted, and so once again they rushed to the television. They were greeted by Emmermann’s face.

Emmermann: “Greetings. I trust you’ve all heard about the… tragedy of Arasaka-sama’s death?”

To Kyle’s surprise, he caught just the tiniest crack in Emmermann’s visage. He was genuinely sad at the loss of a man who was no doubt one of his oldest friends. A sadness he hadn’t even shown at the death of Andrew, his own grandson.

“We’ve heard, Sir,” Jack said, “what are our orders?”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Emmermann said approvingly, “I’m sending pickup to you before the funeral. It’s a Martian week from tomorrow. Kyle, I have a specific assignment.”

Kyle: “Assignment Sir? To do what?”

Emmermann: “I’m sending someone you’re to protect. Michiko Tseng and her husband.”

Harune: “Michiko! What the fuck does she have to do with this?”

Kyle: “Slow down. Who is she?”

Emmermann: “Shinji’s daughter. He disowned her many years ago, long story. I’m sending her to keep the heiress apparent on her metaphorical toes. Kyle, you’re to keep her and her husband alive while they’re at the funeral. Understood?”

Kyle: “As good a way to pass the time as any, I suppose. And the others?”

Emmermann: “Nothing special. No, that’s not true. Jack, I’ll expect you by my side in full dress uniform. You’ll find the uniform in your hotel room. The rest of you either bring your best clothes or see the hotel stylist. Over and out.”

“I guess we’d better be getting things ready,” Kyle said.

“I’ve never met Michiko,” Harune said, almost more to himself than anyone, “she was disowned before I was born.”

“This’ll be an interesting weekend,” Kovac said, a remark that she likely had no idea of the eventual accuracy of.

“Yes it will,” Jack said, “I want everyone watching each other.”

The week passed remarkably quickly, leaving the Medusas feeling rather underprepared for the arrivals that inevitably came. But come they did, in the form of three of Emmermann’s usual rectangular shuttles, descending to the beach where Prometheus was parked. The shuttles landed with their back doors facing the Medusas, who stood lined up, their bags in hand, waiting for the backdoors to open as usual.

As it turned out, two of the craft were empty, and the last was occupied by a young looking couple. The man was fairly tall, with a thick, close cropped beard, and fairly unmistakably Chinese. The woman was short, Japanese, and an ethereal beauty, looking rather like a living porcelain doll.

“Those’ll be mine,” Kyle said briskly, “Harune, come with me.”

“And the rest of us, disperse to those two other ships,” Jack said, and so it went.

Kyle and Harune went to the ship where stood Michiko and her husband, who introduced herself as Angus Tseng.

“I’m glad to meet you Michiko-san,” Harune said, “I’m your younger brother.”

“Oh!” Michiko exclaimed, bowing and extending her hand, “What is your name?”

“I’m Harune,” Harune said, “he disowned me too a while ago.”

And so, during the flight of several hours, Harune and Michiko talked. They chose to not be overly emotional, in the typical Japanese way, but Kyle could tell that they both valued the meeting, and it was good for Harune to find someone who shared his scars.

“How did you meet her anyway?” Kyle asked Angus once as they stood aside, giving Harune and Michiko space.

Angus: “My mother was some sort of slave for the family. She never said what kind, I didn’t ask. But Michiko and I played together as children, and in university, she tracked me down and we married, in spirit if not in law, and I think you know the rest.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Kyle said, “but I think I understand your hesitancy.”

“You might not be,” Angus said, “but your creator is. I don’t need one of your kind to protect my wife.”

“And yet,” Kyle said with a pedantic smile, “I’m all you have.”

“And that is a bad thing, Mr. Dellschau,” Angus said, returning the pedantic smile.

Soon enough, the ship arrived. Apparently “jumping” to the star system wasn’t allowed, and nor was private landing, as an announcement came over the ship’s intercom that they were landing once again at Meerscheimer Tower Spaceport, where Kyle had first landed when picking up Harune.

“I never thought I’d see this place again,” Harune muttered.

“Neither did I,” Michiko said, outstretching both her hands, one of which was taken by her husband, the other by Harune, as the ship’s door began opening.

“Keep holding hands,” Kyle said, switching to protector mode, “and stay huddled around me. We find the group, you three get right in the middle, the rest of us will make a meat shield while we proceed. Got it?”

“Got it,” Michiko, Harune, and Angus echoed, and the four exited the craft, Kyle in front, looking fairly intimidating in his favorite flight jacket and round black sunglasses, his .357 Magnum just out of sight under the jacket, and a pair of KA-Bar’s in their sheaths on his belt.

The ship fully opened, and Kyle, Harune, Michiko, and Angus unloaded, finding themselves on one of the megalithic landing pads branching off of Meerscheimer Tower, to the side of the city of New Munich. The pad, as it turned out, was quite crowded, both with ships and with bodies. The other two Emmermann shuttles stood at either side of the one which Kyle and company had flown in, and without needing to be told, the Medusas huddled to cover Harune, Michiko, and Angus, forming the “meat shield” Kyle had spoken of.

“Where are we going, anyways?” Kovac asked, “This sun is terrible.”

“I’d forgotten how harsh it can get,” Michiko said, after taking a brief glance at the blue giant in the sky.

“Focus, people,” Jack gently reprimanded, “we go through customs, then meet The Old Man at the bottom of the tower.”

“And don’t look too obvious,” Kyle added, “we’re just some assholes here to pay our respects to the fallen, like everyone else around.”

With that, the entire group turned, setting off for the entrance to Meerscheimer Tower, which was thankfully within walking distance, as the landing pad the Medusas had ended up on was directly adjacent to the tower entrance, making it unnecessary to take the monorails which connected the web of further

pads. They walked in loose formation, with Harune, Michiko, and Angus staying in the center as instructed. At least they know how to follow orders, Kyle and no doubt all the Medusas thought, with some slight relief.

"Do you think this Angus fella would mind handing her over for a night?" Max asked Kyle in a telepathic "whisper" as they walked, and Kyle couldn't suppress a slight snicker.

The group reached the customs gate, or rather the conveyor belt around the perimeter of the central lightwell of Meerscheimer Tower, conveying one from formality to formality. First everyone was searched, and their weapons confiscated, followed by a DNA check, or in Kyle's case, a scan of his serial number. Kyle did note a distinctive lack of any kind of disdain for synthetics as he'd witnessed in so many other places. Here, he was put through customs without comment or expectation of ownership. The group's weapons were also returned without much fuss once they were declared; no doubt Emmermann had prearranged it.

Eventually, the Medusas and their charges reached the elevators, and then the atrium and transit station on the ground floor, where one could access both trains into the city or board private craft, the latter of which were on the single landing pad which surrounded this level. Emmermann and Georg stood near to the bank of elevators, ready to greet the group as they exited.

"Michiko! You made it. I haven't seen you in person since you were a little girl," Emmermann exclaimed.

"I suppose not Herr Emmermann. I'd like to know why I'm here, and putting myself and my husband at risk," Michiko said. Kyle admired her directness to authority.

"All in good time," Emmermann said, "now, let's get you all to your hotel."

With Emmermann present, Kyle and the others felt safe to relax and play tourist. Not even an Arasaka assassin would be bold enough to attack someone in Emmermann's party.

All around the atrium level of the spaceport, in addition to the usual tourist fare of tour packages, cameras, transit card machines, and the like being on offer, the space was full of flower sellers, most of them displaying large pictures of Shinji Sr. The man was beloved by all those who never met him, by Kyle's estimation. And it wasn't difficult to imagine why; practically the entire population of New Munich seemed to have benefited from Arasaka wealth, and to have bought Arasaka products. Everywhere one looked, one saw people with tiny but still visible cybernetic enhancements; small hearing aid like devices wired into their skulls, eyes which, on close inspection, were of colors nonexistent naturally (much like Kyle's) and so forth, not to mention innumerable Arasaka PACs, which every young person seemed glued to.

"A real company town," Joshie observed, taking it all in.

The group, led by Emmermann, reached the large outside landing pad, which was quite littered with craft. Kyle noticed a high propensity of the type of craft which had first conveyed him to the Arasaka estate, namely crafts made to resemble a fly, whose eyes were windows out. There were other designs too; lacewings, moths, and beetles. As ever, Emmermann subtly but unmistakably stood out, as his craft was larger than the rest and was designed to look like a dragonfly, the only such design present. Even more surprising was his pilot; a tall green alien who stood to greet the group, introducing herself by her callsign; Tanenbaum.

"Tannenbaum here is an Arcturian," Emmermann explained.

Quite inexplicably, Kyle felt a certain movement in his pants when he shook hands with Tanenbaum, and after a quick glance

around he saw the other men attempting, in the usually virtually invisible way known to all men, to adjust or cover their crotches. As Tanenbaum was decidedly not Kyle's type, he guessed that Arcturians must secrete some variety of pheromone which human (even synthetic human) men must be unable to resist.

"Right then," Emmermann said with a wink to the group, then turning to Tannenbaum, "to the Hyperborea Hotel. Take the scenic route."

"Yes Sir," Tannenbaum said, returning to the flight console.

The Medusas took their seats, which were very soft and comfortable, and abundant enough for all to have a window seat, taking in New Munich. Kyle did so with much curiosity; on his two earlier visits, he'd seen very little of the colony proper.

Kyle's impression of the colony at first glance was that it showed the best of both German and Japanese engineering. The buildings were mostly in the traditional styles of Bavaria and Japan, save their size. Kyle marveled at the skyscrapers of stone with stepped Bavarian roofs, and Japanese pagodas rising hundreds of stories. This was intercut with more normal sized building and more futuristic buildings, which included the monstrous sail fin shaped glass building that was Arasaka Tower, denoted by the red holographic sign which surrounded it.

"Arasaka Robotics: The impossible is the today," the sign read. It was a hell of a tagline, Kyle thought to himself.

Indeed, neon holographic signage was everywhere in the colony, advertising everything from hotels, to gene therapy clinics, to technological devices of all kinds including many implants, and once, a sign for a brothel staffed exclusively by synthetics. Its tagline was; "We can't say no." Even in the morning, these signs were bright. Kyle looked forward to seeing them at night.

One district was seemingly a world away from the others. This district was made up partly of 20 artificial above-ground lakes, about a mile square each, and several dozen giant skyscrapers, which on inspection were massive hydroponic gardens, built up rather than out.

"Those lakes are for sushi," Michiko explained.

Eventually, Tannenbaum lifted the craft up, to give those inside the craft the best view of the center of the city from above. Here, they saw something that they'd only glimpsed before, which was that in the center of the city, the roofs of the buildings were covered in an ocean of flowers, creating a gigantic technicolor pattern in the shape of a chrysanthemum. Kyle guessed that it must cover an area about the size of London.

"In Shinji's honor. Isn't it incredible?" Emmermann said.

"It's certainly something," Angus said dryly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw Harune, seemingly unconsciously tracing his finger along the bottom of the window he stared listlessly out of. After a moment, Kyle realized it was Japanese writing, and Kyle watched closely, the kana and kanji forming in his own mind.

"Long live the Emperor," were the words Harune traced. The same phrase he'd uttered when he'd learned of his fatherʻa death.

"Sorry to cut in," Jack said, snapping everyone back to reality, "but could we get on to our hotel, Sir? A lot of us are tired."

"Yes, yes," Emmermann said, "we've a long day tomorrow."

With this, Tanenbaum angled the craft, flying back toward one of the districts in the southernmost arm. This seemed to be one of the two tourist towns which Kyle and company had seen. In the first, more central, all the buildings were low lying and traditional Bavarian, the streets wide and car free, with trees

lining them up and down, restaurants and shops spilling onto the street with not a single holographic advertisement in sight. In the one which Tannenbaum flew to, it was the polar opposite, save for the lack of cars, which was a mostly city wide trait. Here, one was bathed in neon among megalithic imitations of traditional architecture.

The building which Tannenbaum flew towards was white and of the Bavarian style of architecture, with four towers, one on each corner which rose above the roof. A neon sign ran its entire width, reading "Hyperborea." New Munich had many qualities, but subtlety wasn't one of them.

Tannenbaum landed the dragonfly craft on the roof of the Hyperborea, and lowered the side ramp to allow all to disembark.

"Right then," Emmermann said as the passengers began lining up, "I leave you all here. I'll be at the Arasaka house. The funeral is in about 24 hours. I think you'll find all you need in your rooms. Don't get killed."

With that, the group was let off. A number of members of the Hyperborea's staff were waiting, in smart black hotel uniforms, and assurances that every comfort would be available in their hotel. This was all the sort of thing one might expect. What was unusual, at least from Kyle's experience, was that the hotel workers were all synthetics. At first glance, one couldn't tell, but a closer inspection revealed a lack of movement of the face, hairlines exceedingly perfect, glassy eyes, and the men not even having follicles for facial hair.

All of the hotel workers carried small glass pads, and after a quick retinal scan of all the guests, they turned, leading them to a large elevator, one out of a bank of them, descending from the roof to deeper into the Hyperborea's structure. The elevators were regal golden cages, with fine silk rug flooring. Even Kyle

felt a touch of guilt at the damage that his boots were no doubt doing, though the Hyperborea's staff didn't seem to mind. The elevator descended several stories, and when it stopped, there was some commotion of all the occupants getting off. In this brief commotion, Kyle leaned down and whispered in Michiko's ear.

Kyle: "I trust I don't need to worry about you and Angus's eyes being flagged?"

Michiko: "Our eyes are the best money can buy, from a back alley gene splice clinic with cash. We're not new to hiding. I'm more worried about tomorrow."

The hallways of the Hyperborea were as one might expect. Grand and stately, yet fairly understated. The walls alternated between wood panels and Japanese embroidered tapestry murals of scenes and motifs from Germanic mythology. The carving of Mjolnir, the destruction of the Ice Giants, the attack of Jormungandr, etcetera, the halls lit by Japanese lanterns, making it all an excellent display of the cultural syncretism so common here.

Everyone got their own bedroom, all in a single block, save for the Tsengs of course, who had a shared room. Both the Tsengs' and Harune's rooms adjoined Kyle's, with adjoining doors. The rooms were very large and luxurious, with red and gold ankle deep carpeting, 4-poster beds, and classical looking white marble bathrooms with huge sunken bathtubs. The young lady who showed Kyle his room also showed him how to use a device new to him, which came standard in every room, known as a "Link."

A Link, as it turned out, looked essentially like a large pair of black sunglasses, waterproof and otherwise generally indestructible, and were the colony's main form of entertainment, through which one could play video games, watch films or the

local news, etcetera, all with choosable levels of immersion. The device was controlled by a single small joystick, and otherwise psionically interfaced with. It was, of course, an Arasaka product, as were all the workers at the Hyperborea. If the Company's economic bubble should now burst, Kyle wondered what would become of these workers, and this hotel, and this city, and ultimately himself.

When the hotel worker had left, Kyle began his standard set up of every room he stayed in; sweeping for any bugs or cameras, identifying all blindspots, finding hiding spots, deciding the places where he would and would not sit, and placing weapons in easy reach of every one of them, which of course meant that these spots had to be a good distance from any entrance. It was not a terribly simple process, but of course to Kyle it was second nature. Therefore, he'd mostly finished when there was a knock at the door which adjoined his room to the Tsengs', and he went to answer it. He found Michiko and Angus standing on the other side, changed into tourist clothes.

"We're going out," Angus said, as though it were a simple fact.

"I beg your pardon?" Kyle asked, smiling as though speaking to a child, which is likely how he felt.

"Well," Michiko said, "my husband and I would like to see the place where we grew up. Is that a crime?"

"No," Kyle said in the same condescending tone, then considered a moment and shrugged.

"Fuck it," Kyle said, turning his attention back to weapons, looking for those he'd wish to take along.

"I wonder about your language, Herr Dellschau," Michiko said, "I'm not accustomed to such-"

“Spare me, Princess,” Kyle said, “either you accept how I talk or the most you’ll see of your hometown on this trip has already passed. Deal?”

With this, Kyle pulled aside the cushion on one chair, taking out the Fernandes P9-A “Motherfucker” pistol he’d stashed there just a few minutes earlier. Neither of the Tsengs flinched as Kyle approached carrying it, which was a hopeful sign.

“Either of you know how to use one of these?” Kyle asked, holding it out to be inspected.

“Herr Dellschau,” Angus said, “you seem under the impression that my wife and I have been sitting on a couch for the past 20 years, rather than fearing for our lives.”

Kyle: “I choose to interpret that as a yes. Take it, though if anything gets through me and makes you having to defend yourselves necessary, you’re fucked already. I’m ready to leave. Do you have credits?”

The Tsengs showed their credit cards, which Kyle saw were of the gene chip variety; small plastic cards with a small clear chip in one end containing some tiny wires, a strand or two of hair, and at center a tiny drop of blood, which made Kyle wonder how they were able to have their genetic codes on file with any bank and not be found. Either the Tsengs were protected, astronomically fortunate, or perhaps more cunning than he’d given them credit for. All three possibilities made Kyle more inclined towards begrudging respect which had so far not been extended to him.

With himself and the Tsengs sufficiently armed, Kyle threw the rest of his weapons into one of his now empty bags, and left them with Buchner. This done, he sent out a wrist computer message to the other Medusas, letting them know the situation and not to follow. Kyle wished Harune could’ve come, but there was too much risk; Harune wasn’t hidden to the system. With

all sorted, Kyle and the Tsengs left, still somewhat against the former's better judgement.

Once outside the Hyperborea, Kyle, Michiko and Angus were on strange ground, though Kyle had made a point of memorizing the streets from the air. Thus, when someone expressed confusion as to the location of the nearest metro station, Kyle was able to direct.

"Where are we heading first?" Kyle asked.

"How about Little Tokyo?" Michiko suggested, "We'll get off at Teikoku Straße."

This seemed as good an idea as any to the men, and so they descended the concrete steps into the metro station. Kyle had implemented a rule of no public elevators; too easy to stop, and no security checks. Thus, the descent into the metro station was quite long, and passed by a number of things, including many holographic posters for both films and attractions and by an entrance to a long shopping arcade. These arcades, Michiko explained, ran a level above the metro and below street level, underneath the entire city, making essentially an entire second city beneath the surface.

"Our ancestors built those tunnels," Angus said with a mix of pride and something else Kyle couldn't pinpoint. Was it sarcasm?

Kyle, Angus, and Michiko finished their descent, into the sleek white underground metro station with tracks present on either side, no trains present yet. At this point, someone in Kyle's party remarked on the fact that at no point had they purchased tickets or a card, and hadn't seen any facilities to do so either.

"We don't use that here," one German woman overhearing them explained, "there's scanners on the train. They scan you

when you get on and off every time, and bill your credits at the end of the month."

"Neat trick," Kyle remarked.

A train arrived soon enough, and Kyle, Angus, and Michiko boarded. Set into the frame of each door was a very faint pale blue field of light. A biometric scanner. It was a very neat trick actually, Kyle thought. Saved everyone the inconvenience of having to purchase tickets, and those who could afford it never had to hear from their bank. And those who couldn't afford it, or who had taken one ride too many for their expenses? Well, that was too fucking bad.

As the group had hit on the correct metro line right away, and their ride was a fairly long one to the north, there wasn't much to do except people watch. Kyle was fairly sure he saw no more than a few persons who looked older than 35, and he was extremely sure he'd never seen so many beautiful women, German and Japanese, in any place, given both the population size and the colony's notably high proportion of women to men.

"And to think I was tempted for a minute by that green alien," Kyle thought.

Kyle made no secret of his wandering eye; he had no need to, and a fair number of ladies here returned it. What amused Kyle was how perfectly Angus controlled himself, his eye never once wandering. Either he was truly that terrified of this place, or much more likely, that terrified of Michiko.

"Poor bastard," Kyle thought with a silent chuckle.

The train ride took nearly an hour, with all the many stops. But eventually, the announcement went up for Teikoku Straße Station, and Kyle and the Tsengs deboarded, into a much larger station than the one they'd gotten here from. This station had a black and gray color scheme, and guarding the street level

entrance were several synthetics with large guns. And what a place stood beyond them.

Teikoku Straße Station opened onto an enormous outdoor square, which at first glance seemed to be made entirely of neon and steel. Holographic signs of all types drifted through the air. In the center of the square was an oak tree, bigger than any oak tree on Earth could ever hope to be, due to the lighter gravity. A real tree too, upon examination, providing a balance against the general artificiality.

The square was bustling. All around, Kyle saw more synthetics than he ever had, most of them apparently free, or at least free enough to walk in public alone without harassment, and even more than that were persons with other parts of technology that made them essentially synthetic themselves.

"Shall we have lunch?" Michiko asked, cutting into Kyle's thoughts.

"Yes," Kyle said, snapping back to reality, "how about katsudon? Or sushi?"

"There's a good katsudon place on this street, or used to be," Angus said, and with shrugs all around, this was where the trio headed.

The restaurant was still extant, and still very excellent. Kyle had the katsudon with orange sauce and a side of French Fries, all either real or from a replicator model so convincing that it didn't matter. At one point, Kyle saw Michiko staring out a window at the street below, as the restaurant was several stories above ground level.

"Is it like how you remember?" Kyle asked cheerfully.

"No," Michiko said without looking at him or smiling back, "it's not how I remember."

For several hours after, Kyle and the Tseng's wandered Little Tokyo, looking in at shops and cafes on occasion and generally

watching the scenery. There wasn't much else they could afford to do.

On one main thoroughfare in Little Tokyo, Kyle and the Tsengs stopped to watch one holographic ad, as did many people. It showed a couple; the man German, the woman Japanese, both young looking and both approximately 100 feet tall. The ad began with the couple dancing sweetly, and after a moment, the man making eye contact longingly with the woman.

Man: "Sweetheart, I love you. I wish we could live forever."

Woman: "But we can!"

Man: "How can we do that?"

Seemingly from a back pocket or some such, the woman would then pull a small, white cylindrical device, which Kyle recognized instantly as a Soul Byte. As he often did when thinking of the device, Kyle lightly stroked his temple, a mostly unconscious tick. At this point, the ad would go into full advertisement mode, the couple turning to face over the city as they continued.

Woman: "Why, with an Arasaka Soul Byte of course!"

Man: "With a quick procedure, and a few code inlays, copy your mind and being into one of these little beauties!"

Woman: "Store and backup your soul in the Arasaka network- safety guaranteed."

Man: "Live forever in your Soul Byte. Get a backup just in case, stored securely in one of our space vaults."

Woman: "Live your life as you see fit- our Soul Bytes are indestructible and your data is never seen unless you request it."

Man: "Get tired of your body sometimes?"

Woman: "Who doesn't?! With the Soul Byte, net jump to any available body on the Arasaka network with a simple visit to one of our technicians. No gene splice needed."

Man: “Worried about your other implants? Never fear. As always, all Arasaka Robotics implants and upgrades are guaranteed fully system compatible, including across virtual reality!”

Woman: “That’s right. And with the Soul Byte, virtual and real have never been easier to slip between. No more stasis brain, no more chem hangover.”

Man: “So what are you waiting for?”

Woman: “Get credit checked today and see if you qualify for an Arasaka Soul Byte, available at hundreds of qualifying clinics.”

Man: “Soul Bytes: by Arasaka Robotics.”

Man and woman in unison: “Arasaka Robotics: The impossible is today!”

“They’re saying that’s why Old Man Arasaka killed himself,” one of the onlookers remarked, “he didn’t want to see the world he’d created.”

“Become God- if you can afford it,” was Angus’s contribution.

It was quite a product, Kyle thought. It might be the most expensive thing in the galaxy, costing not only copious amounts of money, but also one’s soul, but to most, no cost could be too high to become a shapeshifting, galaxy-surfing, immortal, all-knowing demigod. More human than human.

In Little Tokyo, Kyle found a feeling he hadn’t once felt since the day he’d awoken from the vat on Triton; anonymity. In this place, Kyle knew, he wasn’t unique. He could, in an instant’s notice, blend in here and be invisible to his fellow colonists. And even more surprising was that it wasn’t a feeling that he wanted.

It was the first time perhaps that Kyle felt pride in being himself, beyond his race, his prowess with the opposite sex, or his accomplishments as a father. No, he felt pride in simply being Kyle Dellschau. His life hadn’t been easy, and no doubt his

mind was 1,000 contradictions in one package, but he was Kyle, and no one else could ever be him, and he could never be anyone else, and nor would he ever want to be.

After Little Tokyo, Kyle and the Tsengs found themselves in Little Athens, which unlike "Little" Tokyo was indeed quite small, only taking up five blocks. Here, as one might expect, the population was mostly Greek, and made up of enormous recreations of classical Greek architecture. This district also seemed the most isolated. While the German and Japanese populations covering the rest of the city blended seamlessly with each other, the half a million or so Greeks seemed quite isolated, and one rarely saw a Greek outside their own district.

There was one building which stood out to Kyle, among all the others; a white pagoda skyscraper, in the truest sense of the word, rising above all others save for Meerscheimer Tower in the distance. Michiko explained that it was an entertainment complex for the rich and powerful of New Munich.

"I grew up in that building," Michiko said.

"I did not," Angus said. Was it Kyle's imagination, or was there a jealous bitterness in those words?

As the day wore on, there was one last trait of the colony which Kyle noticed; a huge amount of book shops, selling real, physical books, and when he remarked on it, one of the Tseng's explained that New Munich in recent years had become the literary capital of Der Bund, after a campaign to have writers become more centralized.

Eventually of course, tourist time had to come to an end. The blue sun began to sink in the sky, and Kyle insisted that the trio return to the Hyperborea. Begrudgingly, the Tsengs agreed, and so they began the long ride back across New Munich. On the trip, Kyle received a message on his wrist computer. He looked down to see that it was from Tsurabaya, who was asking Kyle's

whereabouts and generally complaining about the company he was forced to keep until the Medusas returned to Mars, which was flattering.

"I'll be in the funeral procession. See if you can pick me out," was Tsurabaya's final message.

Kyle, Angus, and Michiko returned to the Hyperborea, and messaged the Medusas, who outvoted Kyle on regrouping in the hotel dining room rather than eating alone in their rooms, as Kyle wanted. It didn't matter much, and he managed to disassociate from the conversation through dinner before everyone at last went to their rooms.

Kyle didn't sleep that night; his mind was too active. He simply soaked in the room's bathtub for longer than would've likely been healthy for a human, then sat in one of the chairs he'd set up to watch the doors and thought through the night about this and that, his mind linear even then. Not all of his functions could be overcome. But it was undeniable that he'd learned something about himself.

Morning came, as it always does, and with it came the uncertainties of the day, set to rest almost instantly by Emmermann, who sent out a message to all the group's computers; be ready and on the roof in two hours, in their best clothes. What their "best clothes" were, they were to determine themselves, based on what was in their closets.

The best in Kyle's closet was unmistakable; a black kimono with white piping and a light blue sash. The kimono might well have been the one he'd worn on his first night meeting Harune, which was bitterly ironic in some way he couldn't pinpoint. Both he and I are unable to remember specifically what the others wore, save Jack, who was in full dress uniform. The rest must have all been in standard clothing one might wear to a Japanese funeral. In any event, Emmermann's order was

followed, and the Medusas plus the Tsengs were lined up back on the roof when Emmermann's dragonfly craft arrived, and as the day before, everyone boarded, seeing that today, Emmermann flew, with Tannenbaum nowhere in sight. One who was in sight was Georg, which always lifted Kyle's mood, not that it was low.

"Alright," Emmermann said, once everyone was seated and he'd started the ship, "here's how it's going to go. Jack, you're at my side, I'm helping carry, the rest of you just stay out of trouble."

"Helping carry Sir? You mean the coffin?" Jack asked.

"It was Shinji's wish," Emmermann said soberly.

"Am I not at your side today, Sir?" Georg asked.

"Not today," Emmermann said briskly.

Emmermann flew the ship north and west, to a massive domed building on the edge of New Munich, which someone explained was the city's Volkshalle. The funeral would begin here, with a few of the usual addresses by friends and family, and a performance by the singer Misora Hibari.

"The famous one?" Kyle asked, incredulous, as he'd heard so many of her records in the barracks at Camp Hero.

"Is there another?" Emmermann asked.

The landing pad of the Volkshalle was crowded with small ships, and thankfully was well away from the street, which was overflowing with press and the general public, who of course couldn't be allowed to see who was in attendance. A side door stood open to the Volkshalle, and Emmermann and Jack paired off and entered. Sensing it was expected, the Medusas, Georg, and the Tseng's waited for a moment before they entered.

On the way, Kyle gave the Tsengs permission to mingle with the party, within reason. He had a feeling that this was the point at which Emmermann wanted them to be seen. And be seen at

this point they were. The large group, led by Kyle and Georg, entered the large white antechamber room before the main event, and were spotted by Toshiko Arasaka, who raised her hand to wave but then stopped dead, her eyes in shock.

"Michiko?" Old Lady Arasaka said in what seemed to be shocked joy, stepping forward.

"Hello mother," Michiko said, stepping forward tearfully.

"Thank you for bringing her," Toshiko said, stepping around Kyle. He and the others pulled aside out of respect.

As ever, Kyle didn't know a fair amount in attendance, not least because the majority seemed to be Japanese. Kyle did recognize Miki Ito, dressed even here in business wear, and of course the other Arasakas. Eventually he also saw Misora Hibari, and realized she was real when she shook a hand.

"Kyle, come over here, there's someone I want you to meet," Georg said at one point, tapping Kyle on the shoulder.

Kyle turned and followed Georg to one side of the room, where stood a tall brunette woman, who extended her hand.

"I'm Margarethe Neiler," the tall brunette said, "I'm Georg's wife."

"I'm very glad to meet you," Kyle said, with a "what the fuck" look back over his shoulder at Georg, who offered a micro shrug in response.

"You're Georg's old friend Kyle, aren't you?" Margarethe Neiler said, "And I know what you and my husband do for fun. No need for pretense."

"Does she?" Kyle asked Georg tensely.

"Yes," Georg said, "I'm not allowed secrets from my wife."

This told Kyle all he needed to know, which was that this marriage was one of the classic business marriages of the Breakaway's upper echelon. Convenient and meaningless, meant to produce one single result. Kyle was just glad to see it was

friendly, and he looked forward to being the best uncle he could to the resulting children.

“Oh my Gods,” Georg breathed, looking past Kyle, “how the fuck did he get in here?”

Kyle looked. He saw Georg staring, in open mouthed shock, at a brown haired man in a flight suit, standing at least seven feet in height, surveying the room as though it were a buffet table.

“Who is-“ Kyle began.

“Terence Rudolf Bruner,” Georg cut in, “The Old Man’s own prodigal. Oh my Gods. What a day.”

“This seems bad,” Kyle observed in half sarcasm.

Almost at that moment, Sakura asked for the attendees' attention, at which point she said the funeral was to begin, and to follow her from the antechamber and into the main hall of the Volkshalle, and form a circle around the coffin. Everyone did so, of course. Kyle stared up in wonder for a moment at the geodesic dome above as he moved with the other guests across the floor. The Volkshalle was too large to justify seating the guests, he could plainly see, as he began stepping into the circle.

Kyle stood next to Kovac, by some fluke or another. By less of a fluke, Miki Ito sidled up next to him, slipping a piece of paper into the sash of his kimono.

“Miss Ito,” Kyle said, suddenly feeling bold, “it’s always a pleasure. Your love note is very nice. I could kill you where you stand and get away with it, you know.”

“Surely you want to hear the great Misora Hibari sing first?” Miki said, slipping back into the crowd as the lights dimmed.

As they dimmed, Misora Hibari stepped into the middle of the circle, standing next to Shinji Arasaka Sr’s coffin. She held a microphone up to her mouth, and with almost reverent intonations, sang the following song.

Me o tojite nani mo miezu,
Kanashikute me o akereba,
Kōya ni mukau michi yori
Hoka ni mieru mono wa nashi.

Aa, kudakechiru sadame no hoshitachi yo,
Semete hisoyaka ni kono mi o terase yo.
Ware wa yuku, aojiroki hoho no mama de,
Ware wa yuku, saraba Subaru yo.

Iki o sureba mune no naka,
Kogarashi wa naki-tsuzukeru.
Saredo waga mune wa atsuku,
Yume o oi-tsuzukeru nari.

Aa, sanzameku na mo naki hoshitachi yo,
Semete azayaka ni sono mi o oware yo.
Ware mo yuku, kokoro no meizuru mama ni,
Ware mo yuku, saraba Subaru yo.

Aa, itsu no hi ka dareka ga kono michi o,
Aa, itsu no hi ka dareka ga kono michi o.
Ware wa yuku, saraba Subaru yo.
Ware wa yuku, saraba Subaru yo!

As soon as the song ended, leaving the audience in mostly stunned silence, Kyle surreptitiously pulled the little folded piece of paper from his sash where Miki had left it and unfolded it.

“What is that?” Kovac whispered, reaching over.

“Don’t touch,” Kyle said as his eyes shifted to the darkness to read the note.

“Kyle-

Meet me at Kawasaki Sushi in eight hours. Bring Michiko and Harune. Come alone with them.

-Sakura”

Kyle crumpled the note and dropped it. It wasn’t that he didn’t see what was happening; he saw that Sakura was going to attempt to buy him off. For a moment, Kyle fancied he was deciding whether to obey, and then of course reality set in, and he knew he couldn’t disobey an order, much less from an Arasaka. But that didn’t mean he had to like it, and he resented that it had been him targeted for this order, as the only one who couldn’t have refused.

Kyle next surveyed the crowd once again. He didn’t see much having changed, except that now, Harune and Michiko stood near Madame Arasaka, and that Emmermann was apparently still unaware of Terence Rudolf Bruner’s presence, as he didn’t seem to be angry for the moment.

Eventually, Sakura’s eulogy ended. Apparently it was the only one allowed, as afterward, she invited all present to follow her and the family as the coffin was taken to the Arasaka plot for burial. At this, the lights in the Volkshalle turned back on, and it was possible to see that the funeral party had been surrounded by the Arasaka guard, in their black smartsuits with silver rifles and the same collapsible plasma edged katanas which the Medusas carried. In this massive guard unit, Kyle saw Tsurabaya, blending seamlessly with the synthetics who no doubt made up the majority of the unit.

The Arasakas moved to the front of the coffin, to lead the procession. Harune and Michiko were among them. Also among them of course was Yoshi, who was quite visibly “not having it.”

“The press is going to have a fucking field day,” Kyle heard a man behind him say delightedly.

The coffin bearers included Emmermann and Admiral Hayao Takahashi, whom Kyle had met during the signing of the Treaty of Neu Berlin. In the very front stood Sakura and Shinji Jr, bearing Shinji Sr's katana and wakizashi, respectively. His favorites got the ultimate honor.

The procession moved forward, surrounded by the guard. The procession was very long indeed, both in length and in distance walked to the burial. It led first out the front of the Volkshalle to the street, lined with the silent public. As the procession passed, the mourners dropped their token offerings alongside them. Kyle saw that the offerings consisted of flowers and implants, new and unused by the look of them.

After this, the procession turned off the street, heading out of the proper colony altogether, into the hills. There must have been some sort of sound barrier technology, as the sounds of the city went silent instantly as the procession passed out of it, so that they were now in the peaceful countryside, with the wind in the trees and the birdsong wafting through the air.

The procession must have walked over a mile along the wide path through the hills before at last reaching their destination; a high, impenetrable looking bamboo fence with a single gate, which Old Lady Arasaka unlocked, allowing entry to what proved to be the Arasaka family cemetery, which was a classically Japanese style affair, with simple stone floor, and stone shrine-style gravestones, a new indentation in the ground for Shinji Sr.

"If you have to die, this is the place to be," Kyle thought morbidly.

The coffin was laid in the indentation in the ground, then General Takahashi stepped forward and placed a box atop the coffin, a small wooden box with an etching of a chrysanthemum atop.

“Old Man Arasaka’s medals,” someone near Kyle whispered in explanation to nobody in particular.

After the coffin was laid to rest and Shinji Sr’s medals along with it, the stones moved aside to make the indentation were placed back in by a few soldiers of the Arasaka Guard, who carried gold rifles rather than the usual silver ones. Shinji Sr’s swords were placed, unsheathed, standing up in the little patch of dirt, with their full handles and a few inches of blade showing. At last, the usual lit incense bowl was brought forward and placed atop the headstone, and a moment of silence followed. Kyle wondered how the smell of the incense was able to circulate, and so looked up, surprised somehow to see that the cemetery had a just barely visible force field over it.

“Ladies, gentlemen, Barons, Daimyos, soldiers,” Sakura said turning back to the attendees after the moment of silence, “thank you all. You all knew my father, and most of you were even welcome. Go your own ways now.”

With that general rebuff, the attendees turned to leave the cemetery. Harune fairly ran to Kyle’s side, and Michiko followed him at a slightly slower pace, rejoined at the same moment by her husband from a different direction.

“Good to see you all,” Kyle said, “any idea where one finds a place called Kawasaki Sushi?”

Thus, Kyle explained the note. Jack overrode it on principle, once he’d heard it, until Kyle reminded him that he couldn’t disobey an order, and in any case, he didn’t want Sakura Arasaka as an enemy. Jack split off, saying he planned to do something else then, and that Kyle best not ask questions. Kyle looked on as Jack moved along in the line to speak with Yoshi, which Kyle looked away from.

The Medusas, now with Tsurabaya among them again, having been released from his official duty, plus the Tsengs and Georg, reached Emmermann's dragonfly ship.

"Back to Mars tomorrow?" Emmermann asked Kyle as he started the ship. "You have one night left at the hotel."

"I'm not sure," Kyle said, "I've a feeling I'm about to work my way into some money."

Emmermann opened his mouth to speak, then stopped for a moment, and looked at Kyle with a grin of some look Kyle wasn't sure he recognized. Was it respect perhaps? A touch of pride?

"You're a sly Toaster, aren't you?" Emmermann said with a chuckle. That was definitely it; some form of fatherly pride. Kyle knew that feeling well enough to recognize it in others.

"I do believe so, Sir," Kyle said, grinning back, then turning to take his seat beside Harune.

"How was your mother?" Kyle asked.

"Cold as ice. Wanted me and Michiko there to make her look good. Fuck her," Harune said, then turned to the window, his voice becoming distant as he continued; "Fuck them all. Yoshi is a good man though."

Kyle patted Harune on the shoulder, then stopped himself from saying anything further, realizing Harune needed to be alone with his thoughts. And so he was until the ship landed once again on the roof of the Hyperborea.

"Right," Kyle said once all had deboarded, "Harune, Michiko, and Angus; how long to get to Kawasaki Sushi?"

"It's at the top of the big pagoda," Michiko explained, "should be about 45 minutes."

"Right," Kyle said, glancing at his wristwatch, realizing that it was a fine piece of Japanese technology in its own right; "that gives us about five 1/4 hours. Let's go to our rooms."

“I need a drink,” Harune said in agreement.

Everyone went to their rooms. Kyle simply lay out on his bed naked, glad to be free of the restrictions of a kimono and wooden shoes, and here he remained for a bit, only getting up again to get the room’s complimentary Link, on which he played some full 3D immersion video game or other until the time came to put clothes on, arm himself, and be ready to leave, and so he was, ready quite early and knocking on Harune and the Tseng’s hotel room doors.

“Do we have to do this shit?” Angus asked.

“Unfortunately yes,” Kyle said firmly.

Everything set, Kyle, Harune, and the Tsengs set out. They arrived at the massive white pagoda, where the doors stood open. Most of the businesses in New Munich were closed, as it was a day of mourning. A single synthetic sat behind the security desk in the black marble and gold entrance to the white pagoda skyscraper.

“Miss Arasaka is expecting you on the top floor,” the synthetic said, “go on up in the elevator.”

And so they did. Unfortunately, the elevators had no windows, so Kyle was unable to observe any of the other businesses in the pagoda. The elevator pulled to a halt at last, opening at the edge of the large circular restaurant that was Kawasaki Sushi. In its center was the Sushi Bar, where a middle aged couple stood, slicing fish and other ingredients. The tables were of the traditional low-lying variety, of dark hardwood. A few of the synthetic Geishas of the type who served the Arasaka estate milled about, though the only guests were Sakura Arasaka and Miki Ito, sitting at one table near the center, the former puffing a cigarette, which seemed rather rude somehow. Miki smiled in her nasty-looking way and waved all over. Kyle

nodded, and himself, Harune, Angus, and Michiko crossed the room, sitting at the table across from the women.

Sakura: “So you did come.”

Harune: “You knew my father couldn’t refuse, that’s why you asked him.”

Miki: “It’s not enough that you’re a faggot. Now you call this gaijin toaster your father.”

Kyle: “And this gaijin toaster rocked your world, as you’ll recall.”

Angus: “Oh dear God.”

At that moment one of the geisha synthetics arrived, asking for drink orders. Kyle said that since he wasn’t paying, he’d be having a bottle of the establishment’s finest German lager, and the others ordered similarly.

“Your sushi is coming momentarily,” the geisha said before turning away.

“Just wait until you’ve had the sushi,” Sakura gushed, “it’s quite something. My father gave Mr. and Mrs. Kawasaki there an implant each, containing all the knowledge from all the finest sushi chefs in the old country. All that knowledge, in seconds.”

“All the knowledge they didn’t earn,” Michiko said, “that’s not real life Sakura.”

“No it isn’t,” Sakura said, “it’s better.”

The sushi came, on long white plates, one per person. The geishas set these down in front of everyone, then backed out of sight. The sushi was indeed magnificent, and everyone turned on their etiquette again for a while, switching to discussing this. But of course, it wasn’t to last, and Kyle got tired of it lasting as long as it did, so after a particularly delectable piece, he looked back up across the table.

Kyle: “Alright. So what is this about? Sakura, what do you want?”

Sakura: “Have you tried the Sea Bream? It’s to die for!”

Michiko: “Was his question not loud enough?”

Sakura: “It was. What I’m prepared to do is make both of you traitors an offer. Credit lines, all anonymous. Miki?”

Miki reached into an inside pocket of her jacket, taking out two credit cards for the “First United Capitol Bank of Centurion,” which she put on the table.

Sakura: “Effectively bottomless credits, usable anywhere in Der Bund or Sen no taiyō no Teikoku.”

Harune: “In exchange for?”

Miki: “From Michiko, your silence forever. No more of your pathetic “exposé” articles on the dark net. Every potential customer lost is another reason to kill you.”

Harune: “And from me?”

Sakura: “Well to start, stay away. Never associate yourself with the family again, as long as you live. And something else entirely from you, AB8-1305874.”

Kyle: “And what the fuck do you think I owe you?”

Sakura: “Access. These “Medusas” you and Flynn lead, Emmermann’s private army? You’ll keep me abreast of all his new conquests, and what’s more, you’ll be available for me to hire. And as it’s an order, you’re in no position to negotiate.”

Harune took the card from the table slowly, slipping it into his shirt pocket. Michiko snatched hers up, and without a word, she and Angus stood and left. Kyle took Harune’s hand and stood.

Kyle: “Will that be all?”

Sakura: “I believe so. I wish you’d stay for dessert. They make a strawberry Baked Alaska that’s absolutely to die for.”

Kyle almost began to sit again, but in a sudden flash of strength, Harune reached up and grabbed Kyle’s shoulder, stopping him before addressing Sakura and Miki.

Harune: “Then that will be all. You know Sakura, I hope I live a long, long life, and that you build a pagoda that makes this one we’re in look like a dollhouse.”

Sakura: “Why?”

Harune: “So I can watch it fall and see you land right on your ass. May we go now Father?”

Kyle: “Absolutely.”

Hand in hand, Kyle and Harune turned back and reboarded the elevator. They rode down in silence for a few moments before Kyle turned.

Kyle: “You okay Kid?”

Harune laughed, harder than Kyle had ever seen him laugh, and Kyle laughed along with him after a moment. Nothing much seemed to matter right then; they’d won this round, well and truly.

Harune: “That felt better than I’d always imagined. I just can’t wait to spend some of her credits.”

Kyle and Harune hadn’t quite had their last surprise of the night, however. They arrived once again in the marble and gold lobby of the massive pagoda, finding, to their shock, not only the Tsengs waiting, but also Yoshi Arasaka, and at his side, the rest of the Medusas.

“They enlisted my help,” Yoshi said with a roguish grin.

“No man left behind,” Jack said.

Author’s note. I hope the reader has enjoyed this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. Of all the chapters in the book so far, this is the one I’ve likely been looking forward to writing the most.

Chapter 11

As Harune had pointed out quite intuitively, there wasn't much point in the credit card Sakura had handed out if they never spent any of it. The Tsengs knew where to begin to spend it; a ticket home. They left the Medusas immediately to do this, tired of living in New Munich in hiding, ready to return to their normal lives. It was a somewhat bittersweet goodbye, as it was doubtful that anyone present would ever see them again, but of course it was unavoidable. Sakura had been thrown off guard and was now more Emmermann dependent, and so the Tsengs had served their purpose. For the others of course, it wasn't to be so simple.

Once the group had left the pagoda, Yoshi bade them farewell. He didn't wish to be caught by his sister. The Tsengs proceeded for Meerscheimer Tower to make their way home. The Medusas, however, had another task left in New Munich, which Emmermann had handed down; find and interrogate Terence Rudolf Bruner, then leave him to the elements.

"Alright," Kovac said, "tell us about this Bruner fellow. What are we up against?"

By this point, the Medusas had returned to the Hyperborea, and regrouped in one of their hotel rooms.

"We're up against a lot," Jack said, "I don't know why he won't let us just kill the bastard, but orders are orders."

"Who exactly is he?" someone asked.

Jack: "The Old Man's firstborn, or so he claims. He must be over 300 years old, from the point of view here, and still the runt

of the pack. He was a bad kid, but he sure took the training well. He can't inherit, and he's never forgiven the world for it."

Kyle: "What's his specialty?"

Jack: "Fire. He loves fire. He can make it with his mind. Which is why I hope we can get him off guard."

A low whistle seemed to reverberate through the Medusas.

"I'm not sure I can even do that," Harune said.

"Don't try it!" at least three chimed in.

"Alright," Jack said, flipping open his wrist computer, "my father gave us a bit of information. He says to look at the good hotels, aside from ours. The Rubina, the Tyrol, the Avalon, the Augsburg, the Olympiad, or the Kamakura, should have him."

"The hotels won't give their guest lists. We'd have to search every room," Tsurabaya murmured.

"That'll take a long time," Max said, "too long."

"Exactly," Kyle said, taking the opportunity for a teachable moment, "so think Max; when you touch down on a planet, what's the first thing you look for once you can stretch your legs?"

"Girls," Max said, grinning, then after a moment he got it; "Oh yes, I see."

"So," Hofnitz said, "we ask at the spots near those hotels, offer some cash, find him, get to work."

"So who does the interrogation?" Kovac asked.

"I do," Jack said.

"I can do it," Max said, seeing the flash of distress across his uncle's face, "I was the top of my class in interrogation."

Until then, Kyle hadn't even known Max had been in an interrogation class, but then he wouldn't have. Even as an instructor, Kyle hadn't been allowed to know the details of the other classes, or which students they'd held, and the students weren't allowed to speak about it either.

“I know him better,” Jack argued.

“That’s why I was the best,” Max gently argued back.

“Very good,” Kyle said briskly, “no point in you having skills you don’t use. What do you need?”

“A neural unit. A good one,” Max explained.

“How long are the tech stores open here?” Kyle asked.

“Right through the night in the right places,” Harune shrugged.

“Alright,” Jack said, “Heracles, write out what you need. Orpheus, Demeter, I want you to go out and buy it.”

“And the rest of us?” Harune asked.

“You’re coming with me. We’re going to go find this asshole,” Jack said, “we better start by finding the whorehouses that loan out to the better hotels. He’d have ordered her to his room, he wouldn’t risk wandering.”

“How do you know?” Franz asked.

“Because I wouldn’t either,” Jack said. And that apparently was that.

“Everyone pick a hotel, start looking up the brothels on your Links,” Kyle instructed, and so it went.

A few Medusas took the name of a hotel, while Jack sent them all a photograph of Bruner, which Emmermann had sent, to all of the Medusa’s wrist computers. Harune gave them the number on his new card, and they got to work.

The process was fairly easy; switch on the Links, look for the addresses of the various hotels, and then ask the Link to show any brothels in the area. Then, one would use the dial code to call the brothel, send them the picture of Bruner, and after a transfer of credits, receive an answer. There weren’t many brothels to call; New Munich was many things, but a hotbed of vice didn’t seem to be one. Kyle completed his few calls and had no success. This left him sitting in his room, considering if other

strategies needed to be tried. They were not, as it turned out, as soon enough, there was a knock at the door, and down the hall Kyle heard the doors of the other Medusas being knocked on.

"I found him!" Buchner, the door knocker, was exclaiming; "He's at the Olympiad!"

"Keep your voice down," Kyle chided, then added; "Good work."

All converged in one of the bedrooms, and Buchner explained. Apparently, just as Jack had predicted, Bruner hadn't gone out to find his girl; he'd called up The Hecate, and they'd sent him the services of the lovely Coco, who had joined him in his room at the Olympiad, and had magically remembered his room number for a few more credits.

"Gear up," Jack said, "we leave one at a time, each taking different routes to his hotel, don't converge until I'm at the door."

"Do you think he's expecting us?" Kovac asked.

"I think this feels too easy," Jack said in explanation.

The Medusas returned to their rooms, gearing up one by one. Klein sent a message that he and Hofnitz had acquired the needed goods; Klein the virtual reality setup, Hofnitz the drugs for the interrogation. When it came to the latter, no one asked about the acquisition methods. In any event, Jack ordered them to make their way to the Olympiad, and thus everyone began leaving, Jack heading out first as planned. Kyle followed a few minutes later, and so on. Kyle varied his route once finding the address of the Olympiad, getting off the train occasionally and walking, either on the surface or through the underground shopping arcades. He saw one or two others bringing up the rear, but consciously didn't acknowledge them.

Eventually, Kyle reached the front of the Olympiad, a gigantic Greek Revival masterpiece on the edge of Little Athens, where

he saw Jack waiting to enter. He glanced around, seeing several other Medusas about on the street, all trying and mostly succeeding to look aloof.

Jack sent out a telepathic message; "Turn on your wrist computers. Icarus, when the time comes, jump us all in."

Kyle turned on his wrist computer, which requested a neural link. Granted. Projected into Kyle's head, and all other of the Medusa's, were all the sounds which Jack was hearing. Jack entering the lobby, usual lobby sounds, then the sounds of a long stairwell as Jack ascended it, then at last a knock on a door, and the sounds of the door opening almost instantly. Kyle's hand snapped to his gun, ready to draw the very instant Harune "jumped" him into position, as Jack began speaking to Bruner.

Bruner: "Well well Jack. I was wondering if it would be you. Come in, have a drink."

The sound of Jack entering the room and the clinking of bottles and glasses for a few tense seconds.

Jack: "What are you doing here Brother?"

Bruner: "I'm paying my respects to one of the men who raised me. I can't remember; water or soda in your whiskey?"

Jack: "Soda. And we both know there's more to it than that. I don't want to hurt you. Tell me, let me put you on a ship, and I don't have to do shit."

Bruner: "Fuck you. Drink your scotch."

The sound of drink sipping and swallowing followed before the conversation resumed.

Jack: "So it's been a long time. You've done well for yourself haven't you? Traveling and staying in hotels like this."

Bruner: "You can do better than that. But yes, I have. I'm living a life you could only dream of."

At that moment, the Medusas were greeted by the sound of cracking glass and a grunt of pain from Jack.

“Ahoy, Icarus,” Jack grunted defiantly.

The next instant, Kyle was awash in that instant of nausea one feels when one is being “jumped,” and the instant after that, Kyle stood in the hotel suite which Jack and Bruner were in, surrounded by the other Medusas. The hotel was large and the walls mostly of white marble, save for one with a wallpaper mural, and half of another being a large window.

Of course, Kyle and the others weren’t looking at the room much. Their eyes all snapped towards one side of the room, where stood Jack and Bruner. Bruner held shut Jack’s fist, which was full of broken glass, blood dripping to the white carpet. Jack, however, was smiling as Bruner looked around the room at his opponents. For a split second, Kyle thought he might give up.

“Good one,” Bruner said with a smile.

As Bruner spoke, a fireball formed in midair, coming for the little cluster of Medusas which included Kyle. Quick as a flash, they ducked, and while the fire missed them, it caught on the paint on the ceiling, which was set ablaze instantly.

With a roar, Jack kicked Bruner away, and with a scream, Cheng lunged at him with her knife, weaving with superhuman speed out of his grasp and cutting his arm, quite nastily judging by the geyser of blood which squirted out for a moment. This, combined with a throat punch from Jack which no doubt would’ve decapitated a normal man, sent Bruner staggering back. Hofnitz saw what she thought was an opportunity and drew a long syringe from her coat and began climbing Bruner’s back to administer whatever cocktail was in the syringe, but Bruner hadn’t been beaten enough and so shook Hofnitz off as though she were a fly. Several Medusas, including Harune, pulled guns, but they stood too close to Bruner, who lunged, and with his fists, scattered the gun bearers. This called for brute force. By this point, the sprinkler system had turned on.

Kyle lunged forward with his fists, landing sharply on Bruner's mammoth back, which began to buckle, and the sound of ribs cracking was heard as Jack, Klein, and Tsurabaya attacked from the front and sides, and Cheng once again attacked with her knife, delivering a very severe cut across Bruner's diamond hard visage.

"Duck!" David shouted from behind Bruner.

Kyle and the others ducked. Bruner, now slightly disoriented, didn't, and rather spun on his heel as David and Kovac lifted up a marble coffee table and threw it. Bruner lifted his arm to block, but after the trauma his body had endured, it served only to knock him squarely on his back, dazed for a moment, during which Franz drew his pistol, landing a pair of shots squarely on Bruner's crotch.

"Fuck you!" Bruner roared.

Now likely powered purely by adrenaline-fueled rage, Bruner shot to his feet, grabbing the throat of whoever stood nearest, which happened to be Kyle. His squeeze was quite strong. Almost as much pressure per square inch as Kyle's own grip would have been. But not quite, Kyle thought smugly, and with that, reached and put one hand in each of Bruner's most severe wounds- the one on his face and the one on his crotch. With a scream of the most severe pain, in a voice not altogether human, Bruner threw Kyle away, bending forward, coughing and quite clearly dazed, giving Hofnitz the chance she'd needed to pounce on his back and, in an instant, inject her anesthetic right into Bruner's brainstem.

Bruner stood again, with enough force to knock Hofnitz back to the ground, but the anesthetic began to take effect, and he began to slacken, though he began to raise his arms, reaching for his wrist computer. Kyle lunged forward, grabbing Bruner's right forearm, and Max lunged to grab the left. It took a good

deal of effort- Bruner's skeleton was top quality reinforced stuff- but Kyle and Max managed to break Bruner's arms. At last, and not of his own will, Bruner succumbed, his eyes rolling wildly a few times as his muscles slackened and he collapsed forward unconscious, Kyle catching him.

"Little bitch," Jack spat, stepping forward and taking off Bruner's wrist computer, which he then threw to the floor and crushed.

"Icarus, get us to the interrogation site. Now," Kyle ordered.

Harune nodded, and took a good look over the Medusas and that which they were holding, no doubt calculating what did and didn't need to be taken, and a moment later, he "jumped" them all, Bruner included of course, to the site he'd chosen, which they'd left up to him. It was beside a lake, in what seemed to be a totally uninhabited area, though a glance at the sky revealed they were still on the same planet as New Munich.

"I used to escape here. My first jump site," Harune explained, his eyes now dilated from the stress of the jump, "now if I may be excused please."

"Of course," Kyle dismissed, and Harune turned. Joshie went to his side, helping him to the shade to sit down.

Kyle turned his attention back to the others, seeing that Jack and Hofnitz were off to one side, Hofnitz tending to Jack's cut up hand, while the others either simply stood around, nursing bruises or in other ways attending to the impending interrogation.

"This motherfucker sure bleeds a lot," Max grimaced, his fingers sticking together as if caulked by dried blood.

"He has two hearts," Jack explained, " two livers and three kidneys and lungs. Extra set of vocal cords too. Yes, he's got a lot of blood."

“How long should he be out for?” Max asked as he began washing his hands in the lake before setting up.

“Six hours,” Hofnitz said confidently, “I dosed him exactly.”

“Give yourself four hours, Heracles,” Kyle ordered. It wasn’t that he doubted Hofnitz’s capabilities; rather, he wanted to be well and truly gone when Bruner awoke.

With a nod of acknowledgement, Max turned his attention to the small, zipped-up black bag he’d brought, and pulled out the virtual reality unit which Hofnitz and Klein had bought for him, smiling as he saw it. It was a fairly standard unit; a black plastic box, rectangular and about two feet long, from each long side coming eight colored wires, ending in small electrodes. The assembly was accompanied by a glass pad.

Max hurriedly flipped the limp Bruner onto his back, and placed half the wires along Bruner’s forehead, making a snide remark to Cheng that she should be more careful next time, as the cut on Bruner’s face had come very close to being a problem. Cheng assured Max that he was more than welcome to kiss her ass next time he felt like making such a correction.

“That’s no way to talk to your commanding officer’s son,” Max said in feigned shock.

“Too bad she’s correct,” Kyle chuckled to himself.

Max laid down on the ground on the opposite side of the box from Bruner, and Franz came over, plugging Max’s head in using the other electrodes, following the same configuration as Max had used on Bruner. It was a tiny moment, but it followed a trend Kyle had observed, which was that Franz and Max were becoming good friends. Max’s first real, close friend since Andrew’s death.

“Right then,” Max said, firing up his glass pad, “I need someone to watch this after I do the dive. If it gets too crazy or I’m losing control, unplug me and pull me out.”

“How would one know if something like that was happening?” Kovac, who’d crowded near, asked.

“You’ll know,” Max said, making the last adjustments on the glass pad.

With that, Max closed his eyes, and dove right in. Kyle came around the glass pad to watch the proceedings. At first, the simulation Max pulled up was simply himself and Bruner in a white interrogation room. Here, Max gave Bruner a last chance at confession, telling Bruner he could die painlessly if he simply surrendered, rather than resisting. Bruner did resist, and then came the stroke of genius on Max’s part.

“You should’ve said yes,” Virtual Max said, “now I have to start simulation torture.”

“What?” Virtual Bruner said, “We’re already in virtual!”

“No we’re not,” Virtual Max said.

Of course, Virtual Bruner didn’t likely entirely believe this. But the seed was planted that he couldn’t tell entirely.

After this, Max switched over to another screen, one which he’d constructed from bits he’d picked up using a skill to dive into the subconscious, as he later explained. In this one, Virtual Max took the form of Emmermann, and Virtual Bruner was put back to his child self. Here, Max forced Bruner to relive a trauma from his childhood, wherein he was made to kill his kitten, over and over again, in increasingly “hands on” ways. The simulation was so real that most couldn’t watch, though Kyle remained glued to the screen, focused more on Max’s skill than on the momentary brutality, the latter thing being quite remarkable.

After this, Max surfed through various traumas in Bruner’s life; him witnessing a friend get devoured by a giant crab, being buried alive on one operation, and several others now forgotten, until Bruner no longer knew what was happening or why he’d been pulled in. At this point, Virtual Max returned with Virtual

Bruner to the white room, seeming to wake Bruner up from his virtual torture.

Virtual Max: "How much more before you tell me what I want to know?"

Virtual Bruner: "I don't even know what you fucking want anymore!"

Virtual Max: "I'll be direct; what do you want from your life?"

Virtual Bruner: "To fuck over my father."

Virtual Max: "And then?"

Virtual Bruner: "To prove I was a man and go to Valhalla as the hero I am."

Virtual Max: "Thank you."

And with that, Virtual Max pulled a gun from beneath the table of the white room and shot Virtual Bruner in the head. A realistic amount of times to cause his death in his enhanced body, as a single shot wouldn't have done it in the real. Then came the final screen.

In the final screen, Virtual Max took Virtual Bruner to his desired afterlife of Valhalla, where Max took the form of Odin, greeting Bruner in the afterlife.

Virtual Max/Odin: "You did well my son. You never told them what they wanted to know. You held out true till the end."

Virtual Bruner: "But I did tell them. Didn't I?"

Virtual Max/Odin: "No, my boy. They wanted to know who had taken you to New Munich. I'm curious as well. Perhaps they might be here with us?"

Virtual Bruner: "It was a man and woman I met in a bar on Callisto. No names, just tickets and a pair of contacts to trip scanners. I suppose this technology is gone now in this world, isn't it?"

Virtual Max/Odin: "Yes. My son, envision them in your mind for a moment. Those who met you."

With that, a perfectly ordinary looking couple came on the screen, both young and both Nordic blondes. Jack, who happened to be holding the glass pad, touched the screen a few times, no doubt saving the images and sending them to everyone's wrist computers.

"He's telling the truth, that's all he knows," Virtual Max/Odin said, breaking the virtual "4th wall."

"Right, get him out of there," Kyle said briskly, and so someone bent and pulled the electrodes off Max's head.

Max blinked his eyes a few times, sitting up and looking around the real world, which by then had transitioned to morning once again, having taken nearly the full four hours allotted, the night having passed in all the proceedings.

"Alright," Kyle said, "take his clothes, all of them, we're going to trace them and find out where he bought them."

"And his implants," Jack added, "Demeter, take all the implants you can, if he's gotten any implants I want to know where they're from."

"And his tattoos," Kovac finished, "photograph them, maybe we can find where they were done."

Dutifully then, Tsurabaya, Hofnitz, and Klein stepped forward to do just that. In the time while Max was doing the interrogation, Harune had called the Hyperborea, and had, with Kyle's blessing, had the hotel ship all of the group's belongings to Neu Berlin Spaceport, then had bought them passage on an early morning ship to Mars, which they were able to make after Harune "jumped" the Medusas to the woods outside Meerscheimer Tower, where they simply walked up and boarded their ship, a fairly budget (by Breakaway standards) liner, wherein they shared several staterooms with berths and a bathroom at the end of the hall.

With them, of course, were Bruner's clothes, implants, and two new friends; Harune's credit card, and the virtual reality set. As a matter of course, Kyle shared a room with Max.

"Are you awake, Mi Pequeño?" Kyle asked once all in the stateroom had settled down.

"Yes Dad. Is something wrong?" Max asked.

"Not at all," Kyle said, "when we get home, I want you to show us all how to use the ever loving fuck out of that machine, make us as good as you. Can you do that?"

"Sir, fuck yes, Sir!" Max said in a mock drill voice.

"That's my boy," Kyle said proudly.

Author's note. A fairly high octane chapter, and as it turns out, the start of a saga.

Chapter 12

Of course, beyond Max's tutelage, the first real order of business upon landing back on Mars was to trace Bruner. And before even that could be done, Jack's hand injury needed repair. As none of the Medusas knew any very good clinics which didn't demand identification, they put in a call to The Glass Hub, from outside the spaceport. Camille answered, and after asking a few of the girls, she gave them an address of an appropriate back alley clinic.

"Tell them Gerda Schultz sent you," Camille said, "they don't like strangers."

"Right," Kyle said, "Harune, you're coming with Jack and me. The rest of you get the luggage, head to the house on one of the trains, we'll be there soon."

Shrugs went up all around, and the others all split off to the luggage claim, leaving Kyle, Harune, and Jack in the expansive white arrival hall below the spaceport landing pad, out of which one would exit into Neu Berlin, unless one went for the train station, a further level underground.

"Right," Harune said upon exiting, "where is Hamburg Platz?"

"I believe it's near the replica Brandenburg Gate," one of the others said, and thus, after a check of route maps, they hopped aboard the appropriate streetcar and set off.

Jack got quite a few stares, given that he was dripping blood everywhere, but no one asked questions or offered help. It would've been out of turn somehow, to question a military man.

Kyle, Jack, and Harune reached the area quite quickly. An advantage of underground cities with spaceports atop is that there needn't be a distance of any note between spaceport and city, thus cutting transit times considerably. And so in under half an hour, the three men had reached the appropriate district, and were walking street to street, looking for Hamburg Platz. They eventually found it; it was not so much a street as a nearly invisible alleyway. The address Gerda had given looked like nothing more than any of the other buildings in the street, which seemed to be apartment buildings.

"Well, if this is the place it's the place," Jack said walking to the door, "I suppose we'd better give it a chance."

The inside decidedly matched what they'd expected more than the outside. Inside, while the bones of apartments remained, the place was very obviously a black market clinic, with its generally cheap medical equipment and staff who wore no uniforms, not to mention the patients sitting in the plastic chairs near the door, who were mostly prostitutes or men of the criminal element. One of these, a burly black haired giant, stepped forth at the sight of Kyle, Jack, and Harune entering the clinic.

"Are you police?" The giant demanded, in Ukrainian accented German.

"No," Harune said coolly, producing his card, "we're not. Gerda Schultz sent us, my friend needs medical attention."

Trying and failing to look pathetic, Jack held out his injured hand. The giant wasn't paying attention of course, as he was scanning Harune's card on a glass pad.

"Credit checks out," the giant shrugged, "I guess any friend of Gerda is a friend of ours, so take a seat."

And so Kyle, Jack, and Harune sat, taking in the sights around them. The sights weren't exactly strange; it was just that they

didn't seem to belong in this area. This belonged in the shady outskirts of Neu Berlin. The patrons of the clinic would almost certainly be stopped by the local police in this district. It was so odd that Kyle wondered if the clinic perhaps had an underground access point.

Eventually, a pretty young nurse emerged from one of the rooms, calling out the number on Harune's card.

"You qualify for robotic repair," the nurse explained, "come with me please."

Kyle, Jack, and Harune thus followed the nurse to deep inside the building. In the back room to which she led them was a rather interesting setup. In the room was a rather oversized dark pink dentist's chair, very generous even for one who was born and raised in Martian gravity. To its side, on a mobile cart, was a large metal box, glass on one side so that one could see that from the top of the box descended a series of small surgical implements attached to little hydraulic arms. On one side was a hole in which one could insert a limb, and this same side could be removed entirely, to insert one's upper or lower body if necessary.

"Take off your jacket and shirt please," the nurse instructed, moving to a cabinet and removing a syringe and a small bottle, "I'm going to anesthetize your arm."

"With pleasure ma'am," Jack said with a flirtatious wink. The nurse was quite professional of course, but Kyle did catch her eyes lingering on Jack's form as he slipped out of his shirt.

The nurse injected Jack's arm, then instructed him to lay out in the chair and insert his arm into the hole in the side of the surgical unit. She waited several minutes for Jack's arm to numb, then left to fetch the doctor.

"Why'd you fellas come with me anyway?" Jack asked once the nurse had left, sounding almost suspicious.

“You’re going to tell us all you know about Bruner,” Kyle explained, “I brought Harune as a lie detector.”

“Shows how much you trust me,” Jack grumbled, “alright. After the doc is gone.”

The doctor, a short man in a labcoat as all the doctors in Kyle’s life seemed to be, entered a few minutes later. He rounded the table on which the surgical unit sat, to the touchscreen on one side of the unit. After getting Jack’s assurance that his hand and arm were entirely numb, he started the machine, saying it might take up to half an hour to remove all slivers and repair all damage. The doctor then left the room, closing the door behind him, and so Kyle and Harune looked expectantly at Jack, who glared back before at last beginning to speak.

Jack: “I’ll try to condense the story. He was my father’s first-born son. But the laws of the colony they were in said that only a legitimate child could inherit. And so instead, my father decided to raise Terry alone. At least until he had a legitimate child.”

Harune: “I didn’t know laws apply to The Old Man.”

Jack: “It was a different time. So what happened was, he cast the mother away, with money and clones and everything else she might want. Or so he said.”

The anesthesia must have been working with how unusually honest Jack was being about his father, Kyle thought.

Kyle: “So then one of him raised Bruner alone?”

Jack: “For some years yes. Bought an island and a made a full interface clone. Started raising Terry. In retrospect, he was too violent as a parent. He gave Terry a kitten and he named her Petals. He made Terry kill that kitten, then secretly cloned her and gave her back as a surprise Jul gift, only to make Terry kill her again.”

Kyle: “Fucking hell. So what happened next?”

Jack: “It was the beginning of the end. In the coming months, The Old Man married Viktoria’s mother, she became his favorite, then the rest of the kids started to appear on the scene, and he started to forget Terry. And so Terry started to forget him back. He stopped following orders, until one day Terry crossed a line and Father sent him to school and told him to enlist after graduation and the fuck away.”

Harune: “What was the line?”

Jack: “It sounds so stupid now. My father has a rule for his boys; have all the girls you can get your hands on, except the women he has his kids with. Terry crossed that line. And so when Father sent him away, he left. But not before burning down the island he grew up on.”

Harune: “How little things vary.”

Jack: “Quite. And so that’s most of what I know. I haven’t really seen him since I was 14.”

Kyle: “Wait. “Most” of what you know? You haven’t “really” seen him? What do you mean?”

Jack: “I was getting there, motherfucker! Do you see the shit I deal with, Harune?”

Harune: “We should compare notes.”

Jack: “Why don’t we?”

Kyle: “If you two are done; can we get back on topic?”

Jack: “Yeah yeah. Anyway, I saw him once about 15 years ago at a port. He was in civilian clothes and with two women I didn’t recognize. They looked a good deal better off than him. And that’s what I always heard when I’d put my ear to the ground; after he enlisted and trained, he disappeared. Found his way from person to person with the money to help him out.”

Kyle: “Is that all you know?”

“Yes,” Jack said after a pause. Too long a pause. The kind of pause one was meant to notice and allow to pass. And so Kyle

did, as did Harune, a glance at whom revealed that he too had noticed it.

"Fine," Kyle said, "what else can he do?"

"I have no idea," Jack said, sounding truthful this time, "but I suspect not too much. I do wonder why his handlers let him stay kidnapped."

"I noticed that too," Harune muttered, then looked up alarmed and asked; "Father, Uncle, did you shower on the trip over?"

"Yes," Kyle said, "both of us did. Why?"

"And Max? And Iridia?" Harune pressed.

"Max showered at the same time I did," Kyle said, "so did she, I assume. She wasn't covered in blood when we got here. What's wrong, Kid?"

"Contact transferable technology," Harune said, "it occurred to me he might have some, and they're tracking us through that. They let him be kidnapped so they could follow us."

"Hofnitz can scan for that," Jack volunteered, "good thinking."

"I'll try and raise her," Harune said, flipping open his wrist computer.

"They're on the trains," Jack reminded, "don't bother. They'll be fine."

"And what happens to whatever the shower knocks off?" Harune asked.

"The ship either vents it out into space, or breaks it down for the food printer," Kyle said reassuringly. At last, Harune seemed to relax slightly.

"Good thinking," Jack said, "you're learning Harune."

"It's nothing," Harune said, failing to avoid a slight pink creeping over his cheeks.

Soon enough, Jack's treatment ended, and the three men left the secret clinic, after being made to sign a non-disclosure agreement, and reminded that they would also fall into trouble if they disclosed the existence of the clinic, as the clinic had surveillance footage on hand. Kyle decided to make the clinic an offer; protection in exchange for discounts for the Medusas. The offer was declined in no uncertain terms.

"You make friends wherever you go," Jack said once the three were back on the streets of Neu Berlin.

"And you always are there to help me," Kyle shot back.

"I'm wishing you cunts would shut up," Harune muttered.

In time, Kyle, Jack, and Harune had made their way back to The Eagle's claw, and were ready for the next phase. Hofnitz used one of her full body scanners on all present, finding no evidence of any kind of nanites beyond those which they all had already, as a matter of course.

"Alright then," Jack said once the scans were complete, "let's do this. Start with his clothes, those serial numbers can be traced."

"I looked at the implants," Hofnitz volunteered, "they're not human. The serials are in some language I've never seen."

"Let me take a look," Kyle volunteered, and followed Hofnitz to the kitchen, where the few implants that she'd been able to find and remove had been laid out.

"I checked them," Max, who stood looking over the implants, said; "They're not giving off a signal at all. They're safe."

"Good," Kyle said, picking up one rather large specimen which looked like a hearing aid, but couldn't have been, as Bruner didn't wear such a device.

"Not that one," Hofnitz said, "that's an American one. Look at the little silver ones."

"Should he even have had American implants?" Kyle asked.

“They’re cheap,” Hofnitz shrugged, “but the silver ones aren’t. And they’re new. Going by the scar tissue, less than a month old.”

Accepting this answer, Kyle picked up one of the smaller silver implants, which were all a curious sort of crescent shape, rounded at one end. Kyle’s eyes had a built in zoom function, which he used to read the tiny etchings on the implants.

“It’s the script for the language of Aldebaran,” Kyle said in surprise, “serial numbers.”

“What does that mean?” someone who’d come into the kitchen asked.

“I’ve no fucking idea,” Kyle said, “odd, I don’t have anything about them in my database.”

“I do,” Max said, sounding a bit alarmed, “we were taught about them when I was a kid.”

“And?” Kyle asked.

“They’re the enemy,” Max said, “planet is in an exclusion zone.”

Kyle: “For their sake or ours?”

“Ours,” Jack said entering the room, “I’d better update my father.”

“I’ll come with you,” Kyle said.

“Yes, you and Max,” Jack said, and led them outside.

Emmermann was visibly shaken by the news of Bruner apparently working for the Aldebaranites, as one might expect. He was however relieved to hear of the efforts which the Medusas were using to trace those whom Bruner had met with.

“Kill them when you find them,” Emmermann said, a faraway look in his eyes, “I’ll see you have access to facial recognition and so forth.”

“No interrogations?” Max asked.

“No,” Emmermann said instantly, “just execute and don’t investigate. Their cells will come to light in due time. I don’t want to buy a war before I must. Learned that a long time ago.”

Kyle thought privately for a moment about this statement, and of how many wars Emmermann had “bought,” and of what untold wealth and age he must have in order to make such a statement. It was another tiny reminder to Kyle of how little he truly knew.

I could continue with a detailed account of this operation, but as an author, I must make an honest confession; I have no interest in it, and my mind is blocking much. Thus, I will summarize.

The trace was somewhat successful. With a few calls and photographs sent in to the spaceport of New Munich, it was determined that Bruner had come in a private, uncrewed ship under the assumed name of Norbert Weiler, and had left a few days after the Medusas had captured him in perfect health, indicating he’d been able to afford a dip in a regen tank, apparently a less restricted commodity in New Munich. His destination given was the city of Gerritsberg on Callisto, and a check at the port’s registration on Bruner’s ship matched this.

From this, a trip to Gerritsberg was made. For one thing, Bruner’s address was found. On Emmermann’s orders, the Medusas left him alone. Emmermann intended to dispatch a spy to watch Bruner at all times.

What the Medusas were allowed to do however was find the two Aldebaranites whom Bruner had met with. They did this by heading to Bruner’s favorite bar, and after a few threats, getting ahold of surveillance footage, which they used to trace the Aldebaranites via facial recognition, finding that they’d also been living in Gerritsberg under false paperwork.

The Aldebaranite couple were unceremoniously executed. As enemies of the state, this execution was legal. In the apartment which the Aldebaranites had lived in, the Medusas found a small surgical room, and a small portal generator. These weren't lone infiltrators; that much was clear. They had a very rich network.

While the Aldebaranites looked at first like ordinary blonde and blue eyed Germans, making them invisible, when they were killed, one difference was notable; their blood was a dark rusty brown, not the scarlet of a solar human.

Upon the return to The Eagle's Claw, Max went to work on his assignment. He trained the Medusas on everything he knew as regards virtual reality interrogation. How to enter it, how to create environments from scratch, how to plumb the subject's subconscious, and how to resist if one was subjected to it oneself.

Max was an excellent teacher, it turned out; he'd learned much from the tutelage styles of Kyle and his other instructors. It was a little further step towards Max's rise to becoming a great officer. The taught had become the teacher.

Author's note. A short chapter, as I couldn't honestly summon the excitement to write it in a more detailed fashion. It is important info to be remembered however, as usual.

Chapter 13

In the weeks and months following the mission to track Bruner, the Medusas once again entered somewhat of a lull. That's not to say there was no work; there certainly was, but it was fairly dull. For the most part, it was errands for their various clients accrued at The Glass Hub. Threats made to competitors on the black market, one or two contracts signed to protect a few people on dangerous off-world trips, including Salvador Coronado.

One mission which the Medusas were contracted for, made somewhat interesting for its novelty, was that assigned by a celebrity chef, known mononymously as Gerhard, who asked the Medusas for the legs of a giant spider. Gerhard was attempting to start a campaign to encourage colonists to eat spiders more, an assignment from the government to cut down on the general overpopulation of spiders. To be asked to kill a single spider was rather insulting, and so only one Medusa went on the errand, and was quite successful, but the cause had enough novelty to make it stand out.

Other than these few errands, the Medusas decided to improve their general quality of life on Mars. Harune's credit card, their new best friend, came in very handy. To start, upgrades to the house were made, such as a needlecast (antenna) for the television, a few plug-ins for the house AI, a stronger central heating system, and eventually, a few small outbuildings, including a small greenhouse, along with plants and other components for hydroponic farming. Plans were made

to build out the main house further, which didn't happen immediately due to cost and time constraints, but the purchasing of materials began.

Of course, time also had to be split with the Camp Hero house. And as they were still under contract, Project Phoenix missions were still not infrequent. Most of the ones which Kyle was called on bore remarkable resemblance to those he'd been taken on in the opening months following his arrival at Camp Hero; guarding small groups of children on simple missions. Only rarely did such missions run into danger. "Rarely" does not mean "never," however. I'll document a few below.

On one occasion, Kyle and the young soldiers he led were sent to an archipelagic planet in some unspecified corner of deep space. This planet, while appearing Earth-like, had an unbreathable atmosphere. And so the assets wore helmets with air filters built in, alongside their usual smartsuits worn underneath their fatigues, the latter of which contained digital camouflage. David piloted the shuttle which held the group of about a dozen soldiers, all in their early teens save Kyle, David, and the mission's overseeing officer, a young fair haired gentleman from South Carolina known as Alexander Stephens McGill. McGill, despite his thick Appalachian accent, was one of the officers whom Kyle respected; he couldn't be more than five years older than Max, at least his linear age, yet he commanded respect and was an expert strategist.

The planet which the mission occurred on was, in addition to being covered in many archipelagos, mostly tropical. It reminded Kyle of Bellatrix Secunda. He thought of asking, then knew he'd not receive an answer, given that it hadn't been said in the first place.

In any event, Kyle and the others were on this planet in search of an artifact known only as "The Heart." They'd been

given a vague set of coordinates, the one scouting group before having not actually seen the artifact. It was, in a word, ridiculous. But it was orders, and they must be followed.

For at least an hour, the group simply flew over the little archipelago which lay in the coordinate parameters which they'd been given. The turquoise canopy was high and thick. They couldn't see much. Indeed, the only indication that the islands were at all inhabited were the occasional stone chimneys piping smoke just over top of the canopy they peeked from.

"I don't like it," McGill said at last, "I don't like it at all."

All eyes turned to the front of the little ship. At the helm, sitting alongside David, was a girl; this girl, a blonde of about 15 years old from within the former Czechoslovakia. Her name may be lost to history, however her function was as one of those rare individuals known in Project Phoenix as "Oracles of Time." An explanation of this term is thus needed.

Some time, about eight years after the revolution, Jimmy had gotten an idea; rather than outpouring quite so many resources towards checking and rechecking the timeline via the studies and missions from within the Historicity Department, why not make use of those with an almost impossibly heightened gift of nonlinear sight? And so the Time Oracle Program was born, and a few dozen of the most gifted possible nonlinear sight specialists of various ages had been shipped in to Camp Hero and the various satellite bases of Project Phoenix.

The Time Oracle Program's reception had been decidedly mixed. While most of the infantrymen and spies were glad of the added level of certainty, and the mission commanders glad of usually having a high level nonlinear sight expert to take along, the reception of this new class of persons was not universally popular. Those in the Historicity Department were particularly displeased by the fact that their department had

been drastically cut. Many in this department who had worked there for decades had almost overnight been given new and unfamiliar jobs, often to other bases or off planet altogether.

The chain of command had thinned so that Norma Jean Pearce had been promoted to head of the Historicity Department. To celebrate, one of the Medusas had insisted on inviting her to The Glass Hub, where she had then insisted on commandeering the bar to mix her own drink.

"Are you excited?" Kyle had overheard Max asking Norma Jean at one point.

"It's the best thing that's ever happened to me," Norma Jean had said, sounding unconvinced of her own words before continuing; "It's just at so many people's expense."

Max chuckled at this, then proceeded to give Norma Jean a very fascistic minded speech about the strong rising to the top and the right to take power. This gave Kyle a little surge of pride, thinking that he'd raised his boy right. Now, to return to the mission which I was relaying.

"It's odd," the Time Oracle, who sat blindfolded next to David said, "I'm only seeing quiet villages."

"I still don't like it," McGill murmured, "Daedalus, what do you suggest?"

Kyle walked to the window of the little ship and looked out, a few of the trainees following him. They were hard to identify given their gas masks and thick helmets, and no one had seemed very talkative on this mission, but Kyle wondered if they might have been some of his trainees whom he'd had to leave behind when Jimmy had partially fired him. In any event, Kyle soon saw a possible solution.

"That river down there," Kyle said, gesturing to a river which flowed through the mountains on the largest island, "I'm getting an odd feeling that's where we're supposed to go."

“Well isn’t that fuckin-“ McGill began, then stopped his sarcasm, a more thoughtful look coming over his face before he continued; “I was thinking the same. Apollo, take us down there. Fly along the top of the river, at least we can see under the canopy.”

“Yes Sir,” David said, and aimed the shuttle down towards the river.

For a short while, the trip along the river was undisturbed. All looked out the window at the banks of the river, beneath the canopy, where they at last saw the settlements of the planet’s native population. The buildings were mostly single story, stone huts. The roofs were covered in thick vines, braided together and in some way attached to the roofs, presumably for water-proofing. The native population were humanoids, about five feet tall on average with deep blue skin, enormous gold eyes, pointed ears, black or white hair, and long prehensile tails which emerged from cut holes in their robes and skirts.

In retrospect, it should have been alarming that few of the aliens so much as looked up as the Project Phoenix ship flew by, though none except possibly McGill had any knowledge of the level of technology or contact which this planet had. In any event, the trip along the river came to an abrupt end when from the forest came flying a massive golden beam, aimed directly for the little ship.

“Holy shit!” David shouted, tilting the ship upward with inhumanly fast reflexes.

David’s maneuver was mostly successful, as none of the beam hit any of the ship’s windows which were her only truly sensitive areas. However, while the body of the ship could withstand the blow, it was still violent enough to blow the ship sideways, past the bank of the river and into the forest. Rather roughly, the ship landed.

“Hostiles outside?” McGill demanded, after glancing around and seeing that no one was injured.

“Only across the river,” the Time Oracle confirmed.

“Alright, everybody out!” Kyle ordered, and without a word, David opened the back door of the ship. Everyone snapped from their shock, offloading from the ship with their rifles raised, heading to the jungle. All the soldiers present had enough training to handle this scenario.

As always on these sort of operations, protecting the Time Oracle was considered the very top priority. As such, all the soldiers huddled around her while they plunged into the jungle, with her in turn telling them where to go. The Time Oracle performed her job correctly; not a single Project Phoenix soldier was killed on this operation.

The population of the island was actually quite primitive. The gun which had fired the beam was clearly from some ancient civilization which had left the planet or gone extinct. Kyle as always felt slightly sick at the wholesale execution of the locals, but carried it out anyway, and ordered those who seemed at all hesitant to do so to continue it in no uncertain terms. Not only did it mean their lives, but in Kyle’s mindset, killing was the sacred duty they all must perform, unpleasant as they no doubt often found it. The civilization didn’t stand a chance against plasma rifles and highly enhanced soldiers, valiantly though they fought.

“The Heart” was one of the most unique and advanced artifacts Kyle ever encountered. It was found deep inside a cave in the large island’s central mountain. The oddest part was that no one and nothing told the group where to go to find it. They simply walked towards it, almost zombified, to this cave where they found what was, they somehow knew, “The Heart.”

“The Heart” itself was an enormous blue crystal, pear shaped and cut and polished, about the size of a melon. The stone also glowed from some unseen source. A remarkable thing happened as soon as all entered the chamber where it was held; instantly, all the small cuts or bruises the group had sustained vanished, and suddenly their zombie-like state of mind ended. No longer inhibited, McGill picked up “The Heart,” and all left unmolested.

As the Project Phoenix interlopers in their little ship left, they saw something quite remarkable, which explained why the artifact was called “The Heart,” a very fitting name as it turned out. As the invaders left, their bounty in hand, a glance down showed the entire archipelago below dying. The islands had been existing on some sort of harmonic resonance linked to “the Heart” which had kept them alive in entirety. This explained, among other things, why there had been no farming or cooking facilities among the indigenous population, and not a single animal dropping anywhere in the forests.

Not uncommon also in this period were more of the classic “gate control” missions of the type which Kyle had been introduced to in Cheyenne Mountain. Most of these emanated from Camp Hero, and for the most part were unremarkable, at least for a while. On one such mission, Kyle had yet another encounter with the giant blue worms, of the same species which had killed Andrew. He took a sadistic joy in shredding the worms with the projectiles of his gun. One worm got close enough that Kyle killed it with his Arasaka sword, the other assets standing away, visibly taken aback at his violence.

Another operation of the “gate control” variety was one which Kyle did not witness, but which Max told him about his own participation in after the fact, concerned an operation underwater off the coast of Florida, according to the coordinates. On this operation, the operatives had entered the gate

and found some kind of pocket universe, which was a seemingly infinite Caribbean island, inhabited by distant descendants of some long extinct indigenous tribe. The inhabitants called their land "Kokomo."

This mission left an impression on Max such that he wrote a song. There is some dispute between my memory and the memories of others as to exactly when the song was written and released. As the song contained references to places on Earth, Max was required to state that it was a cover of a song written before 1953, and so almost none of the patrons of The Glass Hub ever knew he had written it, at all of his numerous performances. The song was the following.

Aruba, Jamaica, ooh, I wanna take ya
Bermuda, Bahama, come on, pretty mama.
Key Largo, Montego,
Baby, why don't we go?
Jamaica…

Off the Florida Keys,
There's a place called Kokomo.
That's where you wanna go
To get away from it all.
Bodies in the sand,
Tropical drink melting in your hand,
We'd be falling in love
To the rhythm of a steel drum band
Down in Kokomo.

Aruba, Jamaica, ooh, I wanna take ya
To Bermuda, Bahama, come on, pretty mama.
Key Largo, Montego,

Baby, why don't we go?
Ooh, I wanna take ya down to Kokomo,
We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow.
That's where we wanna go,
Way down to Kokomo.

Martinique, that Montserrat mystique,
We'll put out to sea
And we'll perfect our chemistry.
By and by we'll defy
A little bit of gravity.
Afternoon delight,
Cocktails and moonlit nights,
That dreamy look in your eye,
Give me a tropical contact high
Way down in Kokomo.

Aruba, Jamaica, ooh, I wanna take ya
To Bermuda, Bahama, come on, pretty mama.
Key Largo, Montego,
Baby, why don't we go?
Ooh, I wanna take ya down to Kokomo,
We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow.
That's where we wanna go,
Way down to Kokomo.

Port-au-Prince, I wanna catch a glimpse.
Everybody knows
A little place like Kokomo.
Now if you wanna go
To get away from it all,
Go down to Kokomo.

Aruba, Jamaica, ooh, I wanna take ya
To Bermuda, Bahama, come on, pretty mama.
Key Largo, Montego,
Baby, why don't we go?
Ooh, I wanna take ya down to Kokomo,
We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow.
That's where we wanna go,
Way down to Kokomo.

The gate to Kokomo was moved to a space station outside the Solar System, and Kokomo itself was developed by Breakaway real estate developers, who turned a portion of it into a tropical resort spot, very cheap by Breakaway standards due to there being no official owners to rent from. Kokomo became known as "The poor man's New Atlantis." The locals became eligible to take exams to become citizens of certain Der Bund colonies, though few did.

There is one final mission which I would like to draw the reader's attention to, in keeping with the tropical theme. This was a mission handed down to the Medusas only, by the authorities of Project Phoenix, and meant yet another journey to Vietnam.

"Like a bad penny, that shithole keeps coming back," was Harune's observation.

"It's revenge directed at your people," Cheng shot back.

"Now, now," Tsurabaya chuckled, "remember you're outnumbered."

As usual, the Medusas geared up, and after a general plan of strategy, they set off for the portal room. For one of the last times as it would turn out, Mark Muehlbauer, still in a body kept at about nine years old, operated the chair and portal. This

mission had a somewhat unusual structure for those of its type; the gate had already been moved, and the Medusas were sent in to clear the aliens who had come through already. The gate had been in the ruins of the ancient site of My Son.

The aliens, as it turned out, were enormous spiders. Not quite the size of the spiders of Mars, and considerably squishier, as well as hairy rather than shelled, however their greater maneuverability on the terrain gave them an advantage. Even still, the Medusas had begun to feel that these bug hunts were not up to their standard, and even more than this, they knew that Emmermann's patience wouldn't last. Thus, they were determined to begin seeking more, higher level contracts.

Kyle did have one rather sobering experience on this mission. He'd left the group into the jungle a ways, looking for a place to relieve himself, when he came face to face with a spider, clearly a male due to his narrower abdomen. Kyle raised his rifle, but the spider didn't attack. He simply stared. For a moment, Kyle wondered if the spider might be dead already, then had the thought that this might be an ambush. Before he could check his perimeter, the spider spoke to him telepathically.

Spider: "Stay calm. I don't want to do you any harm."

Kyle: "Are you alone?"

Spider: "I've gotten turned around. I have a question, Solaren. Why do you have to kill me? We mean no harm. We'd like to integrate with your species."

Kyle: "I have no answer. I just follow the orders I'm given. Listen."

Kyle swallowed.

Kyle: "Turn around and run into the forest, and I'll let you go. Just leave. Now."

The spider, to Kyle's surprise, didn't need to be told twice. Kyle blinked once, quashing all emotion as he raised his gun and

fired a volley of shots into the fleeing spider, shredding him to pieces in under a second, at least ensuring he didn't suffer. Kyle then quashed his emotions and turned to relieve himself as he'd come to do. Kyle had, of late, been working on suppressing his emotions.

Just a few days after this mission, Tsurabaya came bursting into the men's Camp Hero house, with some shocking news to upset the languid morning.

"Mark Muehlbauer," Tsurabaya said, "he's… gotten a transfer. Finally."

"Well," Jack said, "holy shit. No one deserves it more."

"I'll have to get him a gift," Kyle said, rising, "when does he go?"

"Three days," Tsurabaya explained, "everyone wants to get gifts. They're saying only certain things can go on the ship."

"I'll get him a book," Kyle said decisively, "I'll have to go to Neu Berlin."

"Fuck I hope they let him be a man, wherever he goes," Harune muttered. Kyle couldn't have agreed more.

And so, to get their gifts, Kyle and the rest went to Prometheus, and thus flew to Neu Berlin. My conversations with Max have shown that he purchased a WWI Iron Cross for Mark. While it was rather a given that Mark would be heavily decorated once picked up by Nacht Waffen, in the eyes of the survivors of The Reign of Terror, no amount of honors could ever be enough, and at any rate, there were few things approved.

Kyle for his part purchased a book, as promised. He went to a rather dusty bookstore, and asked the old man who worked there for something befitting a young man about to go on a journey. He got what he asked for.

For his part, Jimmy saw to it that Mark received a hero's goodbye. In the center of the time bubble's version of Montauk

Township, Jimmy ordered a massive street party, with only the best food and drink, and a 200 piece orchestra. Jimmy then drove Mark to the site of the party himself, to party for a number of hours before the portal to the ship was to open.

To begin, after leaving Jimmy's jeep, Mark was surfed over the crowd by way of their hands, then set free. The party is an utter blur in memory, save that it was perhaps the only truly joyful few hours ever universally had at Camp Hero, excepting possibly those few after the successful revolution, which of course Kyle had missed.

It had to end, of course. The portal opened, right in the center of Montauk Township, and as if on cue, all lined the central street. Mark came forward to take his final bow, walking down the street alone and saying his last goodbyes, and in an instant the orchestra moved into position, alongside the opera singer Jimmy had chosen to sing the song to end Mark Muehlbauer's final day at what had been his home, one submitted by Mark's brother, Anthony Muehlbauer, who was to remain at Camp Hero. Many seemed surprised when the singer who took to the stage was Sondra Saunders-Roth, who sang the following song. I've kept the print lyrics as I regen them from the actual event.

I vow to thee my Planet,
All Gaia's gifts above,
Entire and whole and perfect,
The service of my love;
The love that asks no question,
The love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar
The dearest and the best;
The love that never falters,
The love that pays the price,

The love that makes undaunted
The final sacrifice.

And there's another planet
I heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her,
Most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies,
We may not see her Queen;
Her fortress is a faithful heart,
Her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently
Her shining bounds increase,
All her ways are ways of gentleness,
And all her paths are peace.

Oh, I heard my planet calling
Away across the Sea,
Across the wastes of ethers,
She calls and courts to me.
Her sword flames at her side,
Her hair made on her head,
And in regal boots she's wading
The blood of glorious dead.
I hear the noise of battle,
The thunder of her guns,
I haste to thee my Mother,
The son among thy sons!

Kyle stood near the portal, as it turned out, making him among the last 20 or so to say goodbye to young Mark and hand him his gift.

Kyle's final words to Mark were simple; "No matter how far you go, you'll always be a hero, and you'll always be home in your heart."

Kyle's last gift to Mark was an annotated edition of the Teutonic Arthurian classic narrative Parzival. Kyle had left an inscription that he hoped would guide Mark for however long he may live;

"Never forget my boy, you are a German man

-Your forever friend, Kyle Dellschau"

Author's note. A very multi-subject chapter to be sure. Stories I felt must be told, as they certainly affected Kyle's life. To Mark Muehlbauer when and if he should read this- welcome home Brother.

Chapter 14

I would now like to draw the reader's attention to an interlude which happened not long after Shinji Sr's funeral. A happening which, while joyful, all would come to wish had happened many years sooner. It began as so many moments, on one weekday morning at The Eagle's Claw. Kyle and a few others sat in the living room, doing whatever they were doing to pass the time. As they did so, the house's television announced an incoming transmission, and Jack stood and approached the television, instructing the house AI to accept the transmission. Kyle also stood next to Jack, both men reflexively straightening their hair and cuffs.

Kyle and Jack were greeted, as it turned out, by a middle-aged looking Asian woman wearing thick rimmed glasses, seated in a little office with cream colored walls and a traditional Japanese screen at her back, looking intently into her screen.

"Konbanwa" the woman said as Kyle and Jack emerged on her screen, adopting a friendly yet businesslike demeanor.

"Konbanwa," Kyle and Jack repeated in near unison, with a bow.

"Have I reached The Eagle's Claw?" The woman asked.

"Yes madam," Jack said, "whom are you calling on behalf of?"

"I'm looking for Yoshiro Tsurabaya," the woman explained, "is he in residence?"

Kyle and Jack glanced at each other. Kovac, who sat at one edge of the room, also caught their glances, and all three

chuckled, no doubt imagining that this woman was some conquest of Tsurabaya's seeking some sort of reparations.

"Tsurabaya!" Kyle called out, "Get your sushi-eating ass down here!"

The sound of footsteps thumping down the stairs and towards the living room echoed through the house, until at last Tsurabaya entered the room.

"The fucking abuse," Tsurabaya grumbled, "what does your sausage eating ass want, Kyle?"

"You have a guest," Jack said, gesturing at the screen, where the woman who had called was seen, leaned back in her office chair in full throated laughter.

"Why didn't you say so?" Tsurabaya asked, then approached the screen.

"Good day madam, I don't believe you and I are-" Tsurabaya began, then stopped as he got a good look, his mouth slowly dropping open. The woman had stopped laughing and was now staring back at Tsurabaya.

"Fu… Fumiko?" Tsurabaya stammered, his eyes glazing over; "Is that you?"

"Yes," the woman said with a smile, "you look like your father."

"Alright," Kyle said, "who is this?"

"Oh, my manners," Tsurabaya said, snapping back to reality, "this is my aunt. Fumiko Tsurabaya."

"Yes, though it's Fumiko Oda now," Fumiko said, "I'm your friend's father's sister."

"Is anyone else alive?" Tsurabaya asked, sounding painfully hopeful; "My parents? My sisters? My brother?"

"Just us," Fumiko said, turning sober, "and I think it's best if I tell you in person."

“Yes,” Jack said, stepping in front; “I’m your nephew’s commanding officer. Feel free to come see us anytime, Madame Oda.”

“Call me Auntie Fumiko,” Madame Oda laughed, “and Yoshiro-kun, come see me anytime, I have photographs and-“

“I’ll come tomorrow,” Tsurabaya said impulsively, and after saying goodbyes and getting Auntie Fumiko’s address, in New Kyoto as it turned out, the transmission ended.

“I’ll go with you,” Kyle said chuckling, “so you’ll not get in trouble if we miss a contract because you were gone. Congratulations.”

With a nod, looking very distant now, Tsurabaya left the room. Still sitting off to one side, Kovac let out a low whistle. No one else seemed to be present in this part of the house, and so not having much better to do, Kyle went upstairs, packing his bags for the next day. He found Tsurabaya sitting on his bunk, staring off into the distance. For a bit, Kyle simply packed, whistling to himself, but he looked up to see that Tsurabaya had apparently not so much as blinked, judging by the glaze forming on his eyes.

“What’s on your mind?” Kyle asked. At last, Tsurabaya blinked and turned his face back to Kyle.

“I’m trying to remember my baby brother’s name,” Tsurabaya explained, “and I can’t. He must have been about two when I left.”

“That was a long time ago,” Kyle said, then switching to a lighter tone added; “I mean look at you. You’re practically fossilized.”

“Fuck you,” Tsurabaya chuckled, returning slightly to his usual self.

“If you don’t understand something, ping me, and I’ll play the idiot friend and ask your behalf,” Kyle offered.

“Thank you,” Tsurabaya said sincerely, “maybe you’re not useless after all.”

In truth, Kyle of course had thoughts beyond kindness to his friend. The fact was that Auntie Fumiko couldn’t be trusted, not to mention questions such as how she’d found Tsurabaya at all, nor why it had taken her so long, not to mention that it was very concerning that she had gotten the dial code for The Eagle’s Claw. At the same time, Kyle didn’t have the heart to tell Tsurabaya this quite yet, and had faith that his friend would think of it himself. It wasn’t as if he had a chance of sleeping that night.

Dinner that night was the next time that all the Medusas were together. The attitude was universally congratulatory for Tsurabaya, but on a couple of faces, Kyle saw a flash of sadness. No doubt a few of his comrades were thinking of their own families whom they also hadn’t seen in years or decades, or of the fact that they had no families to begin with to their knowledge. But in any event, all were happy for Tsurabaya.

After dinner, Kyle slipped to The Glass Hub and passed several hours “clearing his head” as he no doubt would have put it, with one of the girls, specifically Emilia, the one whom he’d first hired on Neuhalle. After a while, as Kyle laid back on the cubicle’s bed, feeling very satisfied after emptying himself twice, Emilia dropped a bombshell.

“You’ll be the first to know,” Emilia explained, “I’ll be leaving in a few days.”

Kyle sat up in the bed.

“Why?” Kyle asked; “You get a better offer?”

“Well,” Emilia said, “I’ve always had the dream of being a housewife and novelist with a rabbit hutch. I’ve got a client who’ll give me the last two.”

“Congratulations,” Kyle said, meaning it, even as he wondered for Emilia’s safety.

As Kyle looked at Emilia on the bed, realizing this was likely the last time he’d see her naked, he felt a movement once again in his crotch. Perhaps he wasn’t quite satisfied after all, and thus began moving his hands to all the right places.

“One last round. For old time’s sake,” Kyle said with a lecherous grin. Emilia agreed, and so both made sure this round counted.

After Emilia, Kyle had his usual cocktail, and at last returned to the house. He found both Tsurabaya and David, the latter of whom of course would be required to fly Kyle and Tsurabaya to New Kyoto. It made Kyle think, and not for the first time, that it might be time to look for a backup pilot, in the event of David’s death or sudden transfer.

Also that morning, or one very close to it, Max came crawling from his bed with a rather nasty hangover, begging for coffee. As he explained it, he’d gotten into a drinking contest with Joshie, and had lost. Quite humiliatingly actually, as Joshie walked around utterly unaffected, his chest puffed out triumphantly.

“Jesus Christ. You tried to beat an Irishman at his own game?” Kyle said in his best Irish accent as he poured Max his coffee.

“Yeah yeah, fuck you, laugh all you want,” Max growled.

“I do believe I will,” Kyle laughed, which he kept doing the rest of the morning.

Soon enough, Kyle, Tsurabaya, and David reached Prometheus. David took to the pilot’s seat, and Kyle and Tsurabaya took seats on the bridge.

“Alright,” Kyle said as David started Prometheus, “let’s review what you know. So, what was your father’s name?”

“Daisuke,” Tsurabaya said, “Daisuke Tsurabaya. He was a policeman or some such. He liked to bicycle and play practical jokes.”

“Very good,” Kyle said, “and your mother?”

“Misaki,” Tsurabaya said easily, “Misaki Tsurabaya. She was a bookworm and liked to carve wood.”

Kyle: “And her maiden name?”

Tsurabaya: “I can’t remember. Not to save my life.”

Kyle: “That’s alright. And your siblings? How many, and their ages when you left?”

Tsurabaya: “Three older sisters, one little brother, that I know of. My oldest sister was nearly a woman when I left. Her name was Matsuko, I think. My second sister liked me, her name was… Kasumi. My third sister I can’t remember. We always fought.”

Kyle: “You’re doing well. Your younger brother?”

Tsurabaya smiled at this memory.

Tsurabaya: “His name was Genji, after a very old book. My mother insisted. My father was furious that his son had such an outdated sounding name. So my father retaliated by ensuring that Genji’s first word was a swear word. That wasn’t long before I left.”

“Are you sure Genji isn’t Max?” Kyle chuckled, then continued; “Anyone or anything else? How about your grandparents? Aunts or uncles besides Auntie Fumiko?”

Tsurabaya: “I know she’s some years younger than father. I can’t seem to remember any other relatives for sure. I do remember an old woman who visited regularly. Always criticizing my mother’s cooking. Quite rightfully too. But I don’t know if she was related to us.”

Kyle: “You’ve done well. We can figure out the rest.”

“Alright ladies,” David cut in, “we’re orbiting Triton.”

Kyle and Tsurabaya looked up, seeing the rather depressing gray upon gray surface of Triton, close enough to see the glow of a few force fields denoting the various small spaceports of New Kyoto. David dutifully aimed toward these.

New Kyoto, it turned out, must have expanded a good deal since Kyle's last visit, enough to warrant three brand new spaceports, one each for military visitors, civilian visitors, and Arasaka Robotics employees. These ports were of the usual variety, large concrete rings covered in several layers of force fields. As usual again, Prometheus was hailed, and given directions to lower slowly through the first force field covering the civilian landing pad, then stop immediately, at which point she was boarded by security personnel, dressed head to toe in black, on tiny flying motorcycles, who checked weapons and identification.

"Welcome home," said the security officer who scanned Kyle's serial number. Kyle hadn't thought of it, but this was his first time he'd be properly seeing the city in which he'd been built.

"To think," Tsurabaya murmured as Prometheus entered the spaceport, "of all the times I was here and didn't know."

David landed Prometheus on one of the usual pressure pads, and the men offloaded, following one of the spaceport's elevated walkways to one of its many elevators, descending into the city. The elevator was a large, circular, glass affair, which afforded the passengers a view of the crust of Triton as they descended through it. While the surface had been a nearly uniform gray, the ice became sparkling and multicolored, indeed almost iridescent below the surface. It was a remarkable sight.

"It's like an entrance to Asgard," David said in an almost religious-sounding awe.

"Well. I doubt you'll find many Nordic nymphs," was Kyle's contribution, "and more's the pity."

The distance into the moon was surprisingly short, certainly a good deal shorter than would have been on most underground Martian settlements. The elevator exited the ice and rock crust into a massive cavern, filled with the city of New Kyoto.

New Kyoto was surprisingly small, especially for a capital city. Kyle estimated it could hold no more than 100,000 souls, and if it was comfortable, probably only a quarter of that amount. The architecture, again somewhat unusually, was more or less entirely traditional, which clashed with the overwhelmingly modern clothing of the residents. The most modern thing, at least that could be seen on first glance, was the occasional holographic sign drifting through the air. As usual with these underground cities, the source of light was invisible, meaning that some form of photonic manipulation tech was in use. In the center of the city was a massive sakura blossom tree, real by the look of it.

"No prizes for guessing which princess that particular thing represents," Kyle said dryly.

"Better watch those kind of comments around here," Tsurabaya advised, "you're in the belly of the beast."

Kyle figuratively shut his mouth.

The elevator landed at street level, just past a rather wide thoroughfare. A pair of guards, most likely synthetics, both wearing black armor that looked rather like futuristic samurai wear, stood just past the elevator and waved the men through. Once on the street, Tsurabaya beckoned Kyle and David along, deeper into the colony.

"She said she was on level 3," Tsurabaya explained, "I believe the way to get there is on The Edge."

Having no idea what "The Edge" was, Kyle and David simply followed as Tsurabaya led them along the street, to a streetcar station where they boarded one of the many maglev streetcars

which chugged along through the city. The men handed over a bit of NeoYen which they somehow had, along with the others boarding, and the streetcar set off.

The ride to "The Edge," as Tsurabaya had called it, took rather a while. Kyle took advantage of this to lean out of the streetcar's window, admiring the architecture and the commitment which New Kyoto's architects had shown in keeping the entire city traditional. He also took note of the way in which the citizens of New Kyoto treated her synthetic population, who must be quite considerable. This aspect, it turned out, he admired less. While it seemed that synthetics had freedom of movement here, judging by the fact that he saw a number of the more obvious varieties going to and fro apparently freely, those who blended in like himself were still immediately visible by the fact that they all wore silver collars. His visitor status must be the only reason he'd been spared this humiliation, Kyle supposed.

Eventually, the streetcar reached "The Edge," and it became obvious why this district was called such. The district itself looked much the same as the rest of the city, however it was on the edge of a cliff leading further down into Triton, and judging by the light coming up the cliff, there must be a good many structures down the side of the cliff and at it's bottom. At first it looked as though the city simply ended at this cliff, but as one got close one could see that there were enormous panes of glass, connected every few hundred feet by sturdy poles, extending floor to ceiling in the cavern. Kyle supposed that the entrance to the colony must be at an angle such that this was invisible.

Eventually, the streetcar reached a stop next to a bank of elevators descending into the ground. David of course wandered curiously towards the glass wall on the cliff's edge, and no doubt humoring him, Kyle and Tsurabaya followed.

On approach to the cliff at the top of New Kyoto's edge, one could see that the terrain didn't end for long. Another mesa of grey rock stood about a hundred feet beyond it. Every so far down the length of the structures of rock were carved more layers of New Kyoto, five in total built into the cliffs and a final layer in the valley between the mesas, about 3,000 feet down. Glass tube walkways connected the various levels from mesa to mesa. As the city descended, it looked as though it got increasingly modern, at least the parts of the levels visible from the top, so that the tiny district in the valley was fully "cyberpunk." In all, it was quite an engineering feat.

Eventually of course, Kyle and David decided they'd done enough staring, or perhaps Tsurabaya decided such for them, and the men headed for the bank of elevators which descended to the lower districts. They saw essentially nothing of the second level, as it was the third they aimed for. Tsurabaya went quiet on the elevator ride, and so when it let off, Kyle and David simply followed him.

Level 3 of New Kyoto, while still pleasant in its own way, was very different from the traditionalism above. Level 3 perhaps most resembled a largely residential Japanese town of the 1960s, a good deal less wealthy than the top level. There were no synthetics, no geisha houses, and the restaurants were of the simple variety open to the street, dishing out ramen, katsudon, and the like, rather than kaiseki cuisine. The ceiling of the district was also a good deal lower, naturally, so that no buildings rose above five stories, and the buildings were mostly concrete, though the roofs were still stylized, which somewhat lessened the district's drabness, as did the streetcars, which were prettily painted. As above, Tsurabaya led Kyle and David aboard a streetcar, and off they set.

In time, the men reached a very residential district of rather tight, winding streets, and Tsurabaya instructed them to unload from the streetcar once again. This district was somewhat more traditional than much of Level 3 seemed to be, with more buildings of faux wood, though the one which Tsurabaya led Kyle and David to was of textured concrete, painted a very pale pink, with the doors to its 2-story apartments open to the street. Tsurabaya checked his wrist computer one last time and took a deep breath.

"This is the address," Tsurabaya said as he let out his breath, "fuck."

Resolutely, Tsurabaya turned and knocked on the door of one of the pink building's apartments. It was answered almost instantly by Auntie Fumiko, in a white blouse and black pants, perfect for company. She beamed and stepped onto the porch, bowing slightly as she did so. Tsurabaya composed himself and returned the bow.

"I'm glad to see you Auntie," Tsurabaya said, "these are my friends, David Steinel and Kyle Dellschau."

David and Kyle bowed as they were introduced, and then shook hands with Auntie Fumiko.

"Come in, come in," Auntie Fumiko said at last, and beckoned the men into the 2-story apartment.

Auntie Fumiko's apartment, as it turned out, was not very large, though by New Kyoto standards it likely was, Kyle imagined, judging by how real estate in such colonies with limited space generally worked. As usual in Japanese households with limited space, just beyond the door was a small wooden floor where one could slip off one's shoes and exchange them for house slippers, separated from the rest of the household by way of a screen. None of the slippers on offer came even remotely

close to fitting any of the men, but of course they pretended otherwise to be polite.

"Auntie, how did you even find me?" Tsurabaya asked as he slipped out of his combat boots.

"I was in New Munich, paying my respects at Shinji-sama's funeral," Auntie Fumiko explained, "I saw you in the march. You looked so much like your father that I took down the number on your armor and had a friend in The Company check it. And she found you."

It sounded innocent enough for now, Kyle decided, also noting that Arasaka Robotics had such stature in this society that it was simply called "The Company."

All walked around the screen, onto the carpet and into the apartment proper. To the right, just past the screen, a narrow staircase led to the right a few steps, then turned upwards to the apartment's second story. To the left was a narrow living room with a few pieces of furniture, beyond it a small dining room with a little round table, and at the back end a door to a little tiled kitchen. Underneath the stairs was a small door, presumably a coat closet or guest toilet. Kyle clocked only two weapons; the family katana and naginata, both mounted prominently on the wall to the left of the front door. The wall above the rather low green couch was more or less plastered with old photographs in little frames.

"Make yourselves at home," Auntie Fumiko began, but no one was much listening, as Tsurabaya was already walking to the photographs, looking shocked and dazed as he pulled one photograph off the wall. Auntie Fumiko approached to see, and Kyle and David followed.

The photo was a black and white tintype of a man and boy; they were sat on a low lying bench in what looked to be a park.

The man wore a black policeman's uniform, typical of the Victorian era, save for the cap, which sat on the head of the boy, who was no older than six. Who the man was could be in no doubt, as he looked exactly like a beardless and slightly less beefy Tsurabaya. In contrast to the stereotype of Victorian photographs, both of the subjects had very silly grins on their faces.

"Is that… me?" Tsurabaya asked, with that far away look in one's eyes that mean one is recovering some long lost piece of their soul.

"Yes!" Auntie Fumiko said, "With your father, back home in New Kanazawa. You loved wearing his cap. He called you-"

"Little Sergeant," Tsurabaya finished, a slight smile coming over his face; "I loved my father very much."

"You did," Auntie Fumiko confirmed.

"What happened to all of them?" Tsurabaya asked at last; "My parents. My sisters. My brother. Where are they?"

At this question, Auntie Fumiko opened her mouth to speak, then caught the eyes of Kyle and David. Kyle didn't get the hint, being not especially intuitive, but David caught on immediately.

"Hey," David said, "I need a cigarette. Come with me Kyle."

Almost roughly, David grabbed Kyle's arm and led him to the entryway, and then had him take off the tiny slippers, then step back onto the street.

"What was that all about?" Kyle asked as he began slipping back into his boots.

"You giant clueless fucking oaf," David said, "they need a moment."

"Oh," Kyle said, feeling very silly before he continued; "Do you think he's safe in there?"

"If I'm any judge of character," David said, "then that woman never so much as swatted an insect crawling on her arm."

“Oh yes. And we all know you’re an excellent judge of character,” Kyle quipped, “I mean, look at you and… Lois, was that her name? The one-“

“Bite your fucking tongue!” David demanded, turning pink in an instant, earning him a demented chuckle from Kyle.

“Anyway,” David said once he’d regained his composure, “I do need a cigarette, and you can read the squiggles on everything around here.”

With this, Kyle and David set off up the street, in search of one of the convenience stores they’d passed on the way. It didn’t take them long to find one. The store they chose was of the old fashioned variety, with faux wooden flooring and shelves and a blue curtain for a door. In addition to David’s cigarettes, the pair purchased a little box of fancy sculpted candies, as a guest’s gift for Auntie Fumiko, having only then realized they’d forgotten to bring one. The prices of both items were quite eye watering, but manageable. Once Kyle and David had smoked one and a half cigarettes each, David deemed that a suitable period had passed, and so they returned to Auntie Fumiko’s apartment.

David’s intuition was either impeccable, or he’d used nonlinear sight in order to detect the timing, as he was correct that it was now acceptable for them to return. Auntie Fumiko greeted them graciously, accepting the offered candies with the usual, etiquette required show of surprise. Kyle and David reentered the apartment and found Tsurabaya still looking over the wall of photographs.

“These photographs are all I have of the past,” Auntie Fumiko said, “and my swords and my teapot of course. Oh, where are my manners? Would you gents like anything? Tea? Coffee? Sake? Food? Never mind, I’ll just grab everything and you can choose!”

With that, Auntie Fumiko bustled off to the kitchen, leaving the men alone again, which Tsurabaya took as an opportunity to show Kyle and David the photographs. The collection was indeed impressive; Auntie Fumiko, who had taken most of the photographs, had managed to document her family's entire history, from their life in Kobe, to their sudden move to New Kanazawa in the early 1870s, to the births of Tsurabaya and his siblings, to Auntie Fumiko's own first marriage and then her second, and everything in between. She'd lived an interesting life for a civilian, Kyle thought.

"Tell me," David said, once Auntie Fumiko had finished setting out a veritable smorgasbord of drinks and foods, "how did you leave Earth?"

"It's so strange," Auntie Fumiko said, "it was Kobe, in the early Meiji Period. A few of us worked in the foreign concession. We met a Prussian officer- you can see him in one of the photographs- he offered us all passage to America. So we packed up and got onto the boat, and then we slept one night. When we woke, we were in a barracks, under a dome, and told to build a city with what they left us, and it became New Kanazawa in a few years. I suppose we should just be grateful we were pulled out before the catastrophe."

"And I was born in 1890?" Tsurabaya asked.

"You were," Auntie Fumiko confirmed.

"How have you lived so long, outliving all the others?" Kyle asked, rather impertinently perhaps judging by the look Tsurabaya shot him.

"After my first husband died, I married well," Auntie Fumiko explained, "enough to afford a lifelong tank voucher which I kept after we divorced, which was an awfully long time ago."

"You had no children?" Tsurabaya asked, rivaling Kyle for impertinence.

“No,” was all Auntie Fumiko said in response.

For the next while, several hours in fact, Kyle, David, Tsurabaya, and Auntie Fumiko simply sat around the apartment, eating, drinking, and being merry, looking at photographs, etcetera. Auntie Fumiko gave a much bowdlerized telling of the family’s history since Tsurabaya had left. As Tsurabaya gave a more honest telling later on, I’ll not relay Auntie Fumiko’s version.

“Well Auntie,” Tsurabaya said, after a glance at his watch, “this has been… quite something. Is there anything else you’d like me to see?”

“Yes,” Auntie Fumiko said, “your youngest sister, Ume. She worked for the company, and she’s buried here.”

“Let’s go see her,” Tsurabaya said, slowly rising.

Auntie Fumiko nodded, then headed up the stairs, returning almost immediately later with a porcelain decanter of the kind in which one serves sake, this one delicately hand painted with some kind of red vine-growing flower which Kyle had never seen before.

“Your mother painted this,” Auntie Fumiko explained, “soon after you left.”

“It’s beautiful,” Tsurabaya said, “what’s it for?”

“You’ll see,” Auntie Fumiko said, and led the men from the apartment.

The Arasaka Workers Graveyard, it turned out, was on the bottom level of the city, and so reaching it of course meant another ride on the streetcars back to the elevators through the levels of New Kyoto, and then along said elevators down to the bottom of the city. The bottom district seemed the most futuristic, as all of the buildings were skyscrapers, and the usual holographic signs floated all about. Kyle would have liked to explore the district, but for now, there was no time.

The Arasaka Workers Graveyard was tucked around the edge of one mesa, shrouded by a thicket of Japanese Cedars, a small torii gate beckoning visitors onto a path which wove through the little forest. Auntie Fumiko led the men through. The forest wasn't very thick, but it served to make what lay beyond invisible.

What lay beyond was two Shinto buildings, one on each side of a square. In the building to the right, one went and washed one's hands and face in a little basin, grabbed from a stack by the door and filled with water from a rather ancient pump inside. In this basin, one also washed the sake decanter one had brought, as it seemed all those present had.

One then proceeded to the much larger building on to the left of the square, in which was a large, square, wooden pool of water, the rim of which was about waist height for most of those in the building, which was all red on the inside. Inside this building were several Shinto priests. After waiting in line, one would first hand the priest one reached a few token NeoYen, and then the priest would use a bamboo ladle to fill the sake bottle with water from the wooden pool.

"It's sacred," Auntie Fumiko explained, "it comes from the mountain on the surface which Amaterasu showed to Kentaro Nagata in a vision, telling him that it was the on the planet which was the new home of the Japanese People, and he simply knew the coordinates and took the fleet there."

"Do you really believe all that?" Tsurabaya asked.

"I don't know," Auntie Fumiko shrugged, "but it's nice to think it could be real."

After getting one's sake decanter filled, one proceeded past the square, through another gate to the burial ground itself. This burial ground was constructed in a very unique way;

circular graveyards, descending into the ground, with gravestones of either marble or concrete descending downward, each one containing perhaps a dozen levels. Kyle counted seven such descending graveyards. At the bottom of each one was what appeared to be a large mesh dome. Kyle couldn't see through it from up here.

Another unique feature of these graves was that each of them featured a hole in their tops, and a glance around showed why; the mourners would pour the water from their sake decanters into the holes. But this didn't tell one very much.

Auntie Fumiko led the men along to one of the terraced graveyards, explaining that it was home to Ume's final resting place. Kyle saw that the locals had adopted the Western tradition of inscribing phrases on their graves, below their dates of birth and death. One grave caught his attention in particular, as under the name of the occupant, which he's fairly sure was called Ryuuko Iwai, was a serial number, and an emblem of a cog, rather than the usual sun and flower emblems which most of the graves had.

"Is this a synthetic?" Kyle asked; "Do they bury synthetics here?"

"If their owners wish to waste the money, yes," Auntie Fumiko said.

Kyle held his tongue. He saw Tsurabaya open his mouth, but quickly drew his finger over his throat, and Tsurabaya shut up. David looked indignant, but also said nothing, as Auntie Fumiko led them the rest of the way to the grave, a black marble affair on one of this descending graveyard's lower levels, which read the following;

SHIMIZU UME
(009~504)
DANCER IN THE FROST

Reverently, Tsurabaya took the decanter of sacred water, and poured it into the hole in the center of Ume's gravestone.

"There would be such wonderful things to do, if you were the only girl in the world, and I were the only boy," Tsurabaya sang to himself as he poured the water.

"What brought that out?" Auntie Fumiko asked as she took back the bottle.

"It was the first English song I ever learned," Tsurabaya said sheepishly, "I guess it seemed appropriate."

"Come along," Auntie Fumiko said, "I'll show you where the water goes."

Auntie Fumiko led Tsurabaya, Kyle, and David from the grave then, back up to the walkway which ran parallel to the descending graveyards. Just past them was yet another staircase, narrow and winding down into the planet, very easy to miss, and had several members of the public not been heading down, one might assume that it wasn't meant for the public at all.

At the bottom of this staircase was a massive subterranean garden, with winding stone paths all through it, the garden filled with various Japanese plants; Bansai trees, Japanese plum blossom trees, spider lilies, Camelia Japonica, etcetera, all in raised beds to keep them off the paths. The garden was open to the outside via the mesh domes at the bottoms of the descending graveyards, providing the garden with most of its light, aside from the occasional growlights placed around the garden beds. Above each of the beds in the garden's ceiling were tiny holes, which Kyle stared intently at for a moment, and was rewarded by seeing water pour through, falling like rain on the bed of spider lilies which he stood next to.

Auntie Fumiko caught Kyle's stare.

"That's the water that everyone pours," Auntie Fumiko explained; "There's a system of pipes that distribute it all

around the garden. It's so that every time you honor a death, you're helping to grow new life."

"It's beautiful," David said, wiping away a tear, which he no doubt would have blamed on the pollen.

For a bit, Kyle, Tsurabaya, David, and Auntie Fumiko wandered the garden, looking at the truly remarkable foliage. But eventually, as must happen, the men's visit came to an end, as Auntie Fumiko said that the spaceport would be closing soon, and as Kyle and company were very low on NeoYen, it was likely best that they left.

"Please come again," Auntie Fumiko said, sounding almost as though she was begging.

"Of course," Tsurabaya said, "it's been most remarkable seeing you again, Auntie. You'll have to come to Mars someday."

Kyle, Tsurabaya, and David thus returned to Prometheus. After landing on the usual beach, Tsurabaya pulled Kyle and David aside, to tell the honest story of what had happened to his family, not the softened tale Auntie Fumiko had told.

Tsurabaya's father, Daisuke, had been the first to go. He'd not entirely agreed to Tsurabaya being taken, and had thus tracked down someone from the government and had apparently demanded this person, at gunpoint, to tell him about the circumstances which Tsurabaya may have ended up in. What exactly he'd been told, we shall never know, however it was apparently in some way horrific and humiliating, and the mere thought of his favorite child suffering such a fate had been too much to bear, and thus Daisuke had not long after been found dead in a secluded public garden, having shot himself with his own service revolver.

Tsurabaya's mother, Misaki, had managed to recover from the shock, and though she'd lived rather scandalously with a man for several years in exchange for money and gifts, she'd never

remarried, and had died an old woman in New Kanazawa where she'd come to run a little shop carving little wooden statues and hand painting porcelain.

Tsurabaya's eldest sister, Matsuko, had married apparently quite well to a very wealthy man by the surname Kawasaki, who hauled wood from planet to planet to build temples. This had ended rather badly when a set of ropes tied around a stack of logs being loaded onto a ship had failed, and the logs had fallen, crushing Matsuko and five other workers to paste on the ship's loading ramp.

Tsurabaya's second sister, Kasumi, had done quite well for herself, and had left New Kanazawa as a young woman to teach at a German-Japanese cultural exchange school on a planet called Kalmantha, which Kyle had never heard of. Kasumi had apparently lived a happy life and died an old lady.

Tsurabaya's third sister, Ume, was the most mysterious to pinpoint. She'd undergone military training after joining Arasaka Robotics and marrying her husband, a half German, half Japanese man called Alois Shimizu, and both had been killed as part of "a combat unit which came to trouble," as The Company had worded it.

Little Genji had been quite damaged by his father's death and the negative attention turned on his family, and had run away as a teenager. His whereabouts had been totally unknown for many years, until an incident had occurred. A young pregnant woman had shown up on Misaki's door, claiming to be bearing Genji's baby, demanding money, and bringing with her a long list of other women whom Genji had impregnated then abandoned in the colony he'd moved to, where he'd been quite the playboy before falling drunk into a river and drowning. Misaki

had sent this woman away. It should be noted that Genji's children's descendants, whomever and wherever they might be, are quite probably all that remains of the Tsurabaya family.

"Brother, are you alright?" David at last asked once Tsurabaya had concluded.

"I am," Tsurabaya said, "though it is strange to be part of a dying breed."

Author's note. I would like to make a note on the dates given on Ume's gravestone, as I'm sure my readers have noticed that it seems rather odd. The procedure for gravestone dates in the Breakaway is often thus; the year of one's birth going by the calendar in one's birth colony, followed by the year of one's death going sometimes by the colony of one's death, or the colony of one's burial. Thus, Ume was born in New Kanazawa, nine years, on a New Kanazawa calendar, after its creation, and died in the year 504 of either the calendar of the planet she died on, or 504 on a New Kyoto calendar.

Chapter 15

We once again have reached a period in which my general sense of chronology is a bit fuzzy in memory. I can, however, start this segment with the incident which began it, so the reader may be assured that this first incident at least is chronological.

It was an almost mind-numbingly normal night in The Glass Hub; persons drinking and being merry, men propositioning the working girls, with one or two engaging in carnal activities openly at the bar, Max occasionally playing the upstairs piano, which he was rapidly becoming an attraction for, Camille at the door when not with a client, and so on. Kyle remembers that on this evening, he was thinking of looking for a way to contact Abdul from Lebanon, as The Glass Hub was struggling to supply wine, which it seemed was the only beverage which Milosevic in Neuhalle had difficulty in fencing. The one slightly unusual thing was that on this night, Yoshi Arasaka was present, and at the time the trouble began, very busy in a corner booth with a redheaded working girl.

The trouble began at roughly the midpoint in the evening. One bartender had stepped away for a break, and Kyle had offered to cover for her, mostly so that he could gain a bit of intel from a mysterious dark haired woman who sat at the bar. No one had ever seen her, and she didn't appear to be attached to anyone inside. She wore a white dress and expensive black sunglasses, a sort of unspoken code in places like The Glass Hub

that one is present for business, not pleasure, and is only to be approached by a certain crowd.

"Evening Madam," Kyle said to the woman flirtatiously, "I don't believe I've seen you in here before."

"That's because I've never been here," the woman said, speaking English confidently and accurately despite her heavy Russian accent.

"What brings you here?" Kyle asked, slipping into Russian. This began creating the first cracks in the ice, as the woman looked slightly impressed for a moment.

"I came to look for a man," the Russian woman explained.

"Well, if you're looking for one who'll get you a drink, you've found him," Kyle said casually, "so what'll it be?"

"Do you have any good rum?" The woman asked.

"We do," Kyle said, then leaning close and switching to a conspiratorial tone continued; "I have a bottle of Saint Marguerite on ice, fresh from New Paris. Never been opened."

This was a test on Kyle's part, of course. The bottle of Saint Marguerite was likely the most expensive and exclusive thing on offer that day, and the woman's reaction to being offered it was an indication of both her means and likely her standing in society, if she had such expensive taste.

"I'll take it," the woman said easily, "and a pack of matches."

"Coming up," Kyle said, then knelt to one of the little freezers which ran on the underside of the bar, finding his way to the Saint Marguerite and then pouring it up as if he knew what he was doing.

His drink pouring finished, Kyle grabbed a small pack of matches and handed them over, then pretended to be wiping out glasses as he watched the woman light a cigar and begin sipping her rum.

“So,” Kyle said, resuming conversation, “this man you came to see; any particular man, or will any man do?”

This flirtatious line of questioning usually worked, in Kyle’s experience.

“I’m looking more for a category of man,” the woman explained, “one who can help me with a problem.”

At last, the point was being arrived at.

“I see,” Kyle said interestedly, “and what sort of a problem might that be miss… what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” the woman said, then after a moment of Kyle staring with mild contempt at such a response added; “Natalia Kuznetsova.”

“Right,” Kyle said briskly, “Miss Kuznetsova, I think I know what you’re getting at. If you’ll state your business-“

But it was not to be. Before Kyle could finish, he paused, seeing both the bartender, a fellow Silesian named Helena, who had stepped away rushing in through the airlock door, alongside Hofnitz. Kyle looked on as Helena began hurriedly typing in the code to seal the airlock, and Hofnitz bolting to the nearest Medusa, who happened to be Max, and then the pair rushing to Kyle, who turned to them, leaving Miss Kuznetsova hanging mid-sentence.

“We’re under attack,” were the first words out of Hofnitz’s mouth.

“By what?” Kyle asked, immediately switching to mission mode.

“Spiders in armor,” Hofnitz said, “and other insects. A herd.”

“Holy shit,” Kyle said, “okay, Demeter, gather all of the unit who’s in here, Heracles, try and raise The Eagle’s Claw. I’m initiating Active Threat Protocol, starting now.”

“Aye aye Sir,” Max and Hofnitz said, moving away.

Kyle, in keeping with Active Threat Protocol, checked his sidearms; first his plasma pistol, then his .357 Magnum. Both were loaded of course, as Kyle knew, but protocol is protocol, and with it done, he moved quickly to the next stage, stepping back behind the bar.

“Barman? Can I have a ginger and-“ one of the patrons began.

“Maybe later,” Kyle said tersely, kneeling under the bar and opening a long, black box which contained one of the usual bazooka style sonic guns. This he opened, pulling out a gun.

“Hey! The door is locked!” a patron shouted from the front door, no doubt hoping to be heard by a staff member.

Kyle slung the weapon over his back and stood, being greeted immediately by Hofnitz and Max, now joined by Camille, Joshie, Kovac, and Tsurabaya, the only other Medusas present in The Glass Hub. Kyle flipped open his wrist computer and navigated to The Glass Hub’s utility controls, switching off the music, then nodded to Camille, who rushed up the stairs to make an announcement on the stage microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Camille announced, “there is an active threat. We are under lockdown, but there’s no need to panic. If everyone would please-“

Of course, the words “there’s no need to panic,” had the exact effect that those words always have; complete panic. Patrons rushed The Glass Hub’s door and windows. A few enhanced soldiers began smashing the inner airlock door.

“Fuck this,” Max spat.

Before anyone could guess his intent, Max had unholstered his backup sidearm, a Fernandes P9-A “Motherfucker,” and climbed atop the bar, then fired four shots into the ceiling, which not even a gun so powerful as the P9-A could quite penetrate. The shots had the desired effect, as silence momentarily fell.

“Did you not fucking hear?” Max shouted; “We are under an active threat. Those of you useful in a battle may calmly and quickly move to the bins of checked weapons near the front door, grab a gun, and be ready to follow orders!”

“And the rest of you who aren’t useful in this situation,” Kyle continued, enjoying the moment, “are very welcome to get on the ground, crawl under a table, shut the fucking hell up, and let the adults handle the situation!”

The commands had their desired effect; the soldiers, both in and out of uniform, hurried to the bins near the door where all entering were required to leave their weapons, and the rest began crawling under tables. Yoshi Arasaka exited the booth he’d been in, stumbling back into his pants on the way towards Kyle and company.

“Nice going, Kid,” Kyle said as Max climbed back down from the bar.

“Thanks Dad. You weren’t bad either,” Max grinned. Yoshi reached them in that moment.

Yoshi: “Where’s Harune? Is he safe?”

Max: “I raised the house on comms. They haven’t seen anything yet. They’re on the way.”

Yoshi: “Shit. Alright, let me get a gun.”

Almost instantly after this, absolute silence fell as suddenly, the enemy became apparent.

On all the landscape outside, seemingly covering it, was an ocean of huge, glowing, red insect eyes, slowly approaching The Glass Hub, in an unnervingly slow, unmistakably calculating march.

Kyle: “Perseus?”

Tsurabaya: “Yes Sir?”

Kyle: “Kill the lights. Now. Then ditch your computer and get behind me.”

Tsurabaya: “Yes Sir.”

Quick as a flash, Tsurabaya had accessed The Glass Hub’s controls and switched off all lights inside, allowing a fairly full look at the sea of red eyes outside. Kovac began looking up, her face falling as she did so.

Kovac: “Daedalus; why is there no starlight coming in to the roof?”

“Oh fuck,” Kyle groaned, looking up and seeing that she was correct.

Kyle snapped into command mode, and turned, tapping Tsurabaya, Max, Kovac, and Yoshi on the shoulder, then gave them the “wait” hand signal, then stepped away from them and tapped five soldiers who had lined up, weapons in hand. These soldiers were all young German men, part of a squadron who dropped in at The Glass Hub fairly regularly, all wearing the simple, undecorated black uniforms with grey piping worn by Nacht Waffen enlisted men, rather than officers. As tended to happen, these young men somewhat worshipped both Kyle and Jack from the stories they’d heard, and so fell in line immediately. Kyle did one last very fast 360 sweep, then with hand gestures, ordered the others to follow him.

“Heracles, you’re in charge until I get back,” was Kyle’s final instruction. Max gave a quick understanding nod, then began a perimeter sweep of the lower floor.

Quickly but silently, Kyle moved to and started up the stairs, their guns raised. Near the top, just close enough to be able to get a look out the roof, Kyle held up his left fist, the universal sign to stop, and then he looked around. The one good thing he saw was that the upper floor had been cleared of human bodies in the earlier pandaemonium. The rest of what he saw had a definite heart sinking effect.

The glass dome covering the upper half of The Glass hub was covered in the beastly insects in their thick, obviously manmade armor, to the point that all but one panel was covered. Slowly, Kyle stepped up to the floor, looking for a position to start shooting, when a position was chosen for him. In a flash of red and grey, a massive locust beast came crashing through the single exposed panel, straight into the piano, crushing it to smithereens.

"Engage!" Kyle bellowed, raising his sonic gun and firing at the grasshopper as it flew towards him. Kyle never missed, and a useful side effect of the sonic gun was that its large blast radius went straight through the grasshopper and around it, blowing a hole in another portion of the dome which killed a few more insects.

At Kyle's order, the soldiers in his group charged up the stairs, rallying around him, blasting their weapons. The weapons themselves were successful enough; they were all of the kind designed to break through even a force field. The problem was far too many bugs. A horde gushed in through both of the holes opened. One particularly large spider began digging in through one hole, rather slowly, which provided enough of a lull for Kyle to rush to the stage's microphone.

"All units, prepare to engage!" Kyle shouted into the microphone.

Kyle looked up to see that the others were having little success in shooting through the mammoth spider, and they were shouting about getting low on shots. For an instant, Kyle closed his eyes and concentrated with all might, and when he opened them, the desired effect had been achieved; all the spider's limbs had been ripped from its body.

"Fall back! Fall back!" Kyle shouted, bolting back towards the stairs, then as he reached the bottom, gave that order all

soldiers dream of hearing until circumstances are dire enough to make it necessary; "Fire at will!"

"Use any capabilities!" Yoshi added. It wasn't his place to give orders like this, but this was hardly the time to pull rank, and it turned out, it was the best order to give.

For the first time since before she'd left training, Kyle saw Cheng's electrokinesis ability come to the surface that night. Even in Lebanon, they hadn't activated. They certainly did here, when Kyle witnessed Cheng stare very intently at one large spider, and saw it stand still and seize, then electric bolts shot out of its body, which partially exploded, the electricity spreading to a crowd of at least 15 other insects, all touching each other, who were fried in the same manner. A soldier whom Kyle never even identified unleashed a pyrokinetic blast at one unit of bugs approaching a broken window. And Kyle for his part used his telekinesis to a degree he never had before, creating pulses which cut directly through insects, rather than simply blowing them away. Had this been a purely shooting war, it could have never worked.

Eventually, the tide began to turn, and quite suddenly, when a light appeared in the sky, and at least four streams of shots came raining down from the sky, further thinning the horde.

"Hold on. We're coming," Jack's telepathic "voice" said into Kyle's brain. The shots which rained down were coming from Prometheus's shuttle.

"Tell Harune to jump in two more," Kyle said back telepathically, as an aggressive spider leapt at him, which he killed in midair with a punch. Having run out of shots several minutes earlier, and not having his sword in the bar, he'd been forced to switch to only hand to hand combat or telekinesis.

Within seconds, Harune had himself "jumped" into The Glass Hub, along with two others, who turned to be Jack and Buchner.

Harune and Yoshi gave each other quick nods; this was no time for affection. And so the battle continued.

I confess that the specifics of the battle are difficult to remember, beat by beat. However, it was a true show of what the Medusas were capable of- Kyle with his raw strength telekinesis, Jack with his "berserker capability," as he calls it, Cheng with her electrokinesis, Max with his ability to enter minds, which he used to enter into swarms and confuse them into walking into harm's way, Tsurabaya with his swordplay, Harune with his ability to "jump" behind an opponent and cut them down, David with his skills as a tactical fighter pilot, Kovac with her fondness for fire, Joshie's skills similar to Max's, Hofnitz with her pressure-point focused fighting style, Buchner with her gunplay, and Franz and Klein's skills as sniper and spotter, which they used from a drop-point behind the front line. The other soldiers present at The Glass Hub helped of course, but the Medusas carried the battle. An unenhanced army would have been unable to fight this battle; the Medusas ended the assault on The Glass Hub in hours.

When at last the last insect had been killed, Kyle and a few others began to survey the damage. It was shockingly minimal, considering the circumstances. The dome on the roof would most likely have to be replaced, as would likely a quarter of the outer wall of the downstairs. The most severe issue was the sheer amount of bullet holes all around, the destroyed Upright Grand, and the destruction of much of the alcoholic stock. In all, 10 persons died. Six men, four women.

"That greasy Serb won't like restocking all this," Kovac murmured.

"Nor will our overlords enjoy paying it," Jack said, then a mischievous grin spread over his face and he shouted; "Hey!

Free drinks for everyone! No limits, make your own, only rule is the injured take priority!"

"You snakey old bastard," Camille chuckled.

"Never be predictable," Jack said, grinning even wider as the promise of free drinks began finally inducing all to begin crawling out from under the furniture. By now, the sun was creeping up in the Martian sky. As the commotion began, both with the scramble for drinks and to tend to injuries, Kyle split apart from the others.

As Kyle wandered, Max caught his eye and nodded him over to where he stood, next to a side booth. In the booth sat a German officer, of the military intelligence variety judging by the red piping on his uniform. The officer, a classical blonde Aryan with ice blue eyes, had a rather nasty cut on one hand which Max was rather ineffectually but tenderly tending to. At Max's nod, Kyle went to him and the officer. Kyle never knew this officer's name, however from other memories I can say that his name was Jürgen Mahler, deceased less than a year ago at time of writing.

"Tell me what you told him, if you would Sir," Max instructed. The officer nodded.

"There was an oddity," the officer explained, "no one could call for help. We should've been rescued, or at least had some part of the cavalry get here, before it ever reached this point."

"Can you call for help now?" Kyle asked, his eyes wandering suspiciously around the bar.

As Kyle looked, he once again saw Miss Natalia Kuznetsova step behind the bar and grab the bottle of Saint Marguerite rum, which had somehow survived the battle. Kyle tapped Max and pointed with his mind and gaze to watch, then telepathically pinged Jack as well, instructing Jack on where to look. Assuming Jack listened, there were three witnesses as Miss Kuznetsova

pulled up one sleeve, revealing a small wrist computer, which she flipped open and tapped out a few keystrokes, then closed the computer again.

"Sir," Kyle said, addressing the officer, "call it a hunch on my part; try calling for help again."

The officer shrugged, then pulled a tiny handheld glass pad from the inside pocket of his jacket, switched it on, then flipped through several screens, his eyes widening on the last one he reached.

"Well I'll be fucked!" The officer exclaimed; "The signal is back!"

"Finish his hand up," Kyle said to Max, "we have work to do."

Hastily, but with as much care as possible, Max finished the officer's hand. The officer, with his good hand, began calling in a rescue team, and Kyle sat in a chair, one eye fixed on Miss Kuznetsova, the other on Max and the officer. As he watched, Kuznetsova simply sipped her rum. When Max had finished, Kyle stood and pulled him aside.

"I want to interrogate her," Kyle said, "get a few ready. I think she did this."

"Yes, Sir," Max said, and walked away to get a few others. Kyle sent up a telepathic signal to the others that there would soon be a prisoner in the storeroom in a few minutes, who would be transported out once the medic ships had come.

As Kyle walked to arrest Kuznetsova, Jack's voice came over the intercom.

"You owe us," Jack said, somewhat ominously; "you all owe us. Money and work contracts. That is all."

Kyle rounded the bar, coming up silently behind Kuznetsova, catching her petite body in a bear hug with one arm, clutching his sidearm in the other, pressed up against Kuznetsova's kidney.

“Don’t fucking scream,” Kyle breathed into Kuznetsova’s ear; “Do you deny that you caused this?”

“You’re getting bug shit on my new dress,” Kuznetsova said, sounding not remotely afraid.

“That’s the least of your problems,” Kyle hissed, turning Kuznetsova towards the door of the store room in the center of the bar.

Quite suddenly, Kyle punched Kuznetsova in the temple, just hard enough to knock her unconscious, then caught her as she fell, and at last carried her into the room in the center of the bar. In here, he found one of the canvas bags which the bar’s favored brand of schnapps was shipped in, which he cut a narrow slit in. Another canvas bag Kyle cut a piece from and shoved into Kuznetsova’s mouth as a gag, then took the bag with the slit, pulled it over her head, and tied it.

“Someone bring a rope,” Kyle instructed the Medusas all at once, transmitting his location along with the order.

It was Klein who first showed up, bringing a rope with him, which Kyle cut in two, using a piece to tie Kuznetsova’s hands behind her back, then tied her arms onto her body with the other piece. By now, she was beginning to come awake. Her mind kept repeating one simple phrase; “What is going on?”

Harune, who by now had arrived at the little closet, gave Miss Kuznetsova her answer.

“You’re going to be shot for your crimes, you stupid bitch,” Harune spat. Kyle smiled ever so slightly. By this point, most of the Medusas had arrived.

“Alright,” Jack ordered, “everyone to the shuttle, the med ships are arriving. Apollo, take us to the forest.”

And so it went. The Medusas, their silenced prisoner in hand, loaded into the shuttle, and flew in silence to the absolute unspoiled wilderness of the deep Green Belt. David found a

clearing and landed, and at last the prisoner was offloaded and marched into the woods a ways. With a nod from her superiors, Kovac ripped off Kuznetsova's hood and removed the gag.

"Get on your fucking knees!" Kovac bellowed, hitting Kuznetsova in the back of the knee with the butt of her rifle. Kuznetsova fell face first into the dirt, and so Klein stepped forward, grabbing her roughly by the hair and lifting her back to her knees.

"You have exceeded my expectations," Kuznetsova said, spitting out a leaf, and trying valiantly to hide the tears of pain forming in her eyes.

"Oh?" Max said, making rather a show of putting the suppressor on his "Motherfucker" pistol; "And what expectations are those?"

"I was sent to see what a unit called The Medusas could do," Kuznetsova explained, "and so I came. I have a lot of bugs at my disposal."

"Who sent you?" Jack asked, getting in Kuznetsova's face.

"Algorov Dialectic," Kuznetsova said almost too eagerly.

Kyle approached, lifting Kuznetsova back to her feet and carrying her, standing her up against a tree. Now, seeing what was to come, the icy Kuznetsova began to show fear.

"If Algorov Dialectic wish to hire us," Kyle said, his voice dripping ice, "they may call or give us a location to visit for consultation. Miss Kuznetsova, I hope you have good employee privileges."

"No, wait-" Kuznetsova begged as Kyle backed away, joining the other Medusas in the informal firing squad which had lined up.

"Aim low. Make it fucking hurt," Jack spat, and began the chorus of shots which saw Kuznetsova ripped to pieces and left lying in the dirt to be picked apart by animals.

“That felt good,” Buchner commented as the Medusas loaded onto the shuttle once again, “but what about consequences?”

“There’s an expression my father is fond of,” Jack said, ever the philosopher; “Never make an enemy by accident. If they’re not reasonable going forward, then Algorov Dialectic has just made an enemy by fucking accident.”

Whether this would prove true may be judged by the reader when the time comes. However, it cannot be doubted that this incident, and Jack’s words in The Glass Hub began a turning of the tide for the luck of the Medusas. But that is a story for another day.

Author’s note. A beginning of a new period, I dare say. Hold on to your hats, readers.

Chapter 16

A few hours after the incident at The Glass Hub, when most everyone had left and the Medusas and working girls were attempting to estimate the damage costs, an order came in from Emmermann; return to Camp Hero for the time being. For once, such an order didn't seem to be coming down out of anything other than a need to investigate a situation, and Emmermann even praised the Medusas for their actions, assuring them that the ladies of The Glass Hub would be taken care of, and that any possible work contracts would be caught and passed along.

"Nice going men," Emmermann finished, "Sieg Heil. Over and out."

"Sieg Heil. Over and out," Jack, the holder of whatever device Emmermann had dialed, repeated.

"At least someone is in a good mood," Tsurabaya quipped.

“Don’t get used to it,” Kyle advised.

“Right,” Max said, then glancing at his watch added; “we’d probably best haul ass if we want to get back before lights out.”

“No rest for the wicked,” someone added, and so as usual, the Medusas made their excuses and left Emmermann’s assurances, flew to The Eagle’s Claw, packed their bags, and at last flew to Camp Hero, most still rather coated in the remains of insects, to the point that Kyle forbade all except David from sitting down or touching any surfaces whatever.

“Thank you Captain,” Prometheus said at this order, with a mix of gratefulness and disdain.

The arrival went without a hitch. Kyle had likely never before been so grateful for a shower, however communal it may be. And for the next few days, which turned into weeks, which turned into nearly a month, not very much interesting happened. Emmermann sent updates frequently on the repairs being done to The Glass Hub, as did Camille, and both stated that work contracts were being sifted through, as this situation meant that spider hunts were no longer to be considered acceptable.

This isn't to say that there weren't any missions in this era- as always, there were, several times a week, with each Medusa being called away separately for whatever missions the ever-churning machine of Project Phoenix saw fit. As always, they were never allowed to discuss these missions, even with each other.

For Kyle, these missions took, in large degree, the same shape they'd always done; missions escorting groups of Project Phoenix children on brief but often heated ops, generally off-world. One such mission which is mildly worth mentioning was one which Kyle went on accompanied by Buchner, to a planet which resembled Titan, though it couldn't have been, as there was no Saturn in the sky. Here, using plasma weaponry, Kyle, Buchner, and a few other soldiers, using plasma based weaponry protected an archaeological team from plasma-based lifeforms which looked like humanoid shaped masses of black light. If the archaeologists were to be believed, these entities ancestors had built whatever artifacts were retrieved from the site. Kyle would have liked to see these artifacts, but as usual, soldiers weren't allowed.

Another mission of note which happened in this period was one which Kyle went on with another soldier, not a Medusa, into what a look around revealed to be New York City in the very distant future. The Statue of Liberty had been replaced by a

massive tower with an enormous blinking eye mounted atop. Kyle asked a passing woman the significance of this tower.

"Not from around here are you?" the woman asked, her eyes roaming up and down Kyle's height; "That's The Undertaker."

With a few further questions, the woman explained that "The Undertaker," was the remnant of some very brief but very brutal regime which had fallen a few decades before Kyle's visit. The Undertaker had been named such because, underneath the tower it sat on, there had been a prison complex, and the statue had blown a fog horn every time a prisoner was executed. The purpose of this mission was so mundane as to be forgotten, but the iconography made quite the impression on Kyle.

Another mission happened after this which Kyle wasn't a part of, and ultimately would never learn the nature of. It was one of Harune's operations, which he returned from visibly shaken.

"I… couldn't… save… her," Harune kept muttering to himself when he thought no one was listening. Kyle heard a rumor a few days later that on the next two missions Harune had done, his attention to detail had slipped.

"You can't save everyone," Kyle had said in a note placed on Harune as he slept.

A real, lasting change for the Medusas came a few days past the above. Everyone was lying around their houses, as they usually did, when their glass pads all buzzed. David picked his up first and began reading the incoming message.

"Mein Gott," David marveled, getting to his feet, "they're sending us back!"

"Back to Mars?" Tsurabaya asked, not looking up from whatever he was sketching. Several others began reaching for their glass pads as well.

"No," Klein said, "back to Fort Worden. Looks like I get my old apartment back."

“Looks like the boys and I do too,” Kyle said, noting the address with a touch of bewilderment, though he was already looking forward to returning to that place where he’d spent so many happy days.

“Prometheus will be happy,” Kyle said at last; “She hates the beach here. Says the sand hurts her feet. Guess we’d best pack up.”

And so they did. For some reason, no matter how many times it happened, Kyle always felt odd leaving a home behind, but such is life, and anyway, this house wasn't terribly pleasant.

Fort Worden's permanent sunshine greeted the Medusas like a blast of fresh air. Prometheus emerged, as it turned out, through an opening in the massive gate which rose from the ocean, rather than from the usual permanent gate between Fort Worden and Camp Hero. Thus, the view afforded upon arrival was the exact same Kyle had been greeted with when he'd arrived in Prometheus at Fort Worden the first time. The whole thing was very nostalgic.

"Does it feel good to be home?" Kyle asked Prometheus on the beach which she'd called home for so long after Kyle had acquired her.

"Yes Captain," Prometheus said, "I believe it does."

"I think so too," Kyle said, imagining that this must be a sign that the past few years of bug hunts and displays of strength had finally paid off. The reader may note that I've only told the course of a few missions from this period, and that's precisely for this reason; they were so repetitive and dull.

As David landed Prometheus, a group of children who happened to be passing gathered, and crowded with delight around the landing gear. Prometheus closed up of course, but at the sight of the children, she transmitted a psionic pulse that

might be called a "smile," which Kyle reflected, reaching out and mussing the hair of one excited boy.

"Registration office," Jack instructed. Everyone shrugged and followed him, on the path most had walked thousands of times, from the beach to Battery Kinzie. Here, they received the keys to their apartments, and new base passes much the same as the ones they'd had years earlier.

"Alright," Tsurabaya said upon leaving Battery Kinzie, "I'm going to go check on my life's work. See how much they've fucked it up."

"I'll follow you," Buchner said with a dry chuckle.

"What is this place?" Klein asked, earning a laugh from the others who knew the base.

"I'll give you a tour," Cheng volunteered. Was it his imagination, or did Kyle see a hint of flirtation in her tone?

"I'll take it," Klein said. No mistake, Klein and Cheng were flirting and looking to be alone.

"Vaya con Díos," Kyle said to the pair with a wink, and off they set.

"I'm going to the apartment," Max said, "I'm tired."

"I'm coming with you," Kyle said, glancing around and seeing that Harune had already run off.

Kyle and Max thus set off, walking another path they'd walked so often. The road they lived on had been given a name; Beale-feld Road, and their apartment had the address of 1402 1/4. Otherwise, the apartment looked much the same as it always had. Kyle walked to his old bedroom. The same cheap sheets and comforters sat on the bed, and the same alarm clock built into the wall, unable to be set by the victims. Still, Kyle was very glad to not live in a barracks room full of naked men, at least not permanently.

"Some shit never changes," Kyle chuckled, setting his bag on the bed and beginning to unpack.

Kyle unpacked, re-examined the room to refresh his familiarity, then returned to the living room, which had the same large television set and the same green couch. Kyle found Max searching behind the television cabinet.

"If you're looking for your old girlie magazines," Kyle said, "don't bother. Mine are long gone too."

"How fucking dare you!" Max facetiously exploded, rising to his feet; "That stash is somewhere much safer!"

"Oh," Kyle said, grinning, "I wasn't sure you even had one. Good to know."

"Fuck you!" Max hissed, earning an evil laugh from Kyle.

"What the fuck are you doing back there, anyway?" Kyle asked.

"Plugging everything in," Max said sheepishly, "if I can find it, let's watch Sangokushi."

"I'd like that," Kyle said with a smile, "is there anything in the kitchen?"

"No," Max sighed, "I found a paper with our ingredient delivery schedule. Some shit never changes."

Max was right, as it turned out. A short while later, the tram bearing ingredients arrived. Kyle noticed that the proportions had increased considerably in the intervening years, which was something at the least. And so Kyle and Max unpacked, and for a bit, all was sedate while they chatted about this and that, watching nothing meaningful for once on the television. It was some much-needed father and son time that they hadn't had in months, and it continued more. Soon Harune returned, not willing to say where he'd been, and as usual, Kyle respected his son's privacy.

For a few days, this was how the resettlement at Fort Worden went. Tsurabaya, ever the enterprising smuggler, managed to acquire a bootleg tape Sangokushi, the boys's favorite anime when they were children. It held up.

In this tranquil period, Kyle visited the Roths very often, usually multiple times a day. Jason had grown into a handsome young man, augmented and as intelligent as anyone around him, successfully having gotten rid of his Honduran accent, and having definitely taken to heart Kyle's lessons on the fairer sex, though now Fort Worden had an official brothel, in the large white building a couple of blocks from Kyle's apartment, such advice was perhaps not terribly necessary.

"Tell me Jason," Kyle asked during one of his visits, whilst he and Jason sat on a log at the edge of the clearing they'd always talked in, "would you say you had a good childhood?"

Jason paused, a thoughtful look on his face.

"I think so," Jason at last said, "not ideal, but not half bad."

"Your father never... touched you?" Kyle asked, finally ceasing to withhold the question he'd had in mind for over a decade.

With a hearty, snorting laugh, Jason wordlessly reached into his pocket and pulled out an oversized straight razor, which he flicked open. Kyle grinned broadly at the sight.

"Enough said," Kyle laughed, "how old are you?"

"I'll be 19 in a few weeks," Jason said, then with a grin added; "can I come to your bar?"

"I don't see why not," Kyle chuckled, "I'll buy you a hooker. Alright, now let's play ball!"

And so Kyle and Jason did, playing the same game of kickball they'd played for years. They hadn't much improved, but it was the thought that counted.

Alas, Kyle's time spent with the Roths after the return to Fort Worden was not all positive; Ivan Roth, for his part, avoided

Kyle altogether, in all likelihood not wanting to risk another broken pelvis, which Kyle would have issued at the slightest infraction on Roth's part. Sondra, however, was not so careful, nor did she seem to consider herself as at risk as her husband.

Kyle had begun to suspect something might be up when he saw a change in Sondra's demeanor; she was actually pleasant to be around, and her eyes seemed slightly dilated, though they were naturally so dark that it was difficult to tell. And so at last, Kyle once followed her when she slipped out of the family bunker, clutching a blank white pill bottle, stepping behind a tree. Here, she shook a pill from the bottle; a tiny, translucent, round tablet, which Sondra swallowed. Kyle recognized the pill immediately, and stepped into Sondra's view.

"Is that what I think it is?" Kyle demanded.

Sondra: "That depends what you think it is."

Kyle: "I think it's Apocrypha. Serb shit, I've seen it passed around at my bar. Are you fucking taking Apocrypha?"

Sondra: "That's none of your fucking business, is it Kyle?"

Kyle turned in disgust, then whirled back again, staring Sondra hard in the face.

Kyle: "So tell me; how old was Jason when you became addicted? You heard me, answer me, how fucking old!"

Sondra: "He's never been at risk."

Kyle: "Do you care about your son at all?"

Wordlessly, Sondra slapped Kyle in the face, then shoved him roughly aside- she was more enhanced than she looked- then stormed back to the bunker. If Roth hadn't been a concern factor, Kyle would have gone straight to first Jason, then to Sondra's superiors.

And such life continued for the Medusas in their return to Fort Worden. No work contracts came in, but with Emmermann covering Martian expenses and food being delivered at Fort

Worden regardless of contract status, such things seemed less important for the time being, and now there was money to waste. Kyle naturally spent his money at the brothel, as did Max. Harune was, as ever, an enigma as far as how he amused himself. Joshie bought all sorts of new musical equipment. Cheng and Klein never admitted it, but it was clear they spent most of their money on each other. Hofnitz and Buchner hoarded, as did David. Franz somehow purchased several state-of-the-art gun scopes. And as ever, Tsurabaya found all sorts of gifts for the group, though it's unlikely he spent a single unit of official currency. Life was happy for over a week; but alas, as every soldier knows, peace never lasts.

The little interlude of peace came to an end, as they usually do, with a message sent to glass pads. In this case, all the Medusas for once received an equal briefing, which indicated they were to be but a single unit on a rather large operation, which included only two units from Project Phoenix. The other was headed by Anthony Muehlbauer, the last of the Muehlbauer clan in Project Phoenix, on his ship the Calypso, which none of the Medusas had known even existed, but in any event, Prometheus and the Calypso would be only two ships and units out of dozens on a joint German, Japanese, and American operation on Mars out of Fort McCord.

"Land of the fuckin enemy," Kyle murmured upon reading the location, thinking back to the horror stories he'd heard of The Black Crows who had operated out of Fort McCord.

"Times change Father," Harune reminded. Kyle nodded as if he agreed with the very principle he'd taught his son.

As per usual, the Medusas packed their bags, weapons, etcetera, the night before the operation, and in morning headed for Prometheus. On the beach, where a number of ships were parked, they found no other teams leaving Fort Worden. The

Calypso must be parked at one of Project Phoenix's other bases. The Medusas, in addition to specific navigation coordinates, had received specific passes for Fort McCord, these embossed with a holographic inlay of a red pyramid which turned black when held up to the light.

"At least they spent money on the passes," Buchner quipped dryly.

"Americans spend money on everything- except human happiness," was Tsurabaya's contribution, to giggles and nods all round.

David pulled Prometheus into the vicinity of the coordinates almost instantly, as usual for a place as nearby as Mars. The coordinates were in an entirely desert province, with few mountains but a great many craters, or so it appeared. Prometheus emerged out of subspace at almost the same moment as the other ships containing the dozens of units chosen for this operation. Some of the ships were quite oddly shaped and clearly not of human origin.

As the ships arrived, one of the craters vanished- or rather, the holographic image of an empty crater which was projected onto the surface vanished, revealing that the floor of the crater was an enormous Uberconcrete landing pad, and structures had been built all up and down the crater's sides. Kyle made a mental note to see someone about this holographic disguise system, with the purpose of looking into acquiring one for The Eagle's Claw.

Prometheus, and presumably all the ships who had arrived, were hailed with the same message all at once; "Ladies and Gents, please land your ships in a calm and orderly fashion, open your doors, and prepare for inspection, then follow the security officer's instructions to proceed. Welcome to Fort McCord."

The announcement was made to the ships only once, and in American English only, no matter what language those on the ships may have as their mother tongue. But this didn't seem to be an issue, as all the ships began following the necessary procedures, lowering to the landing pad, even doing so in a calm and orderly fashion. Kyle then, as usual, had to order Prometheus to open her doors, which she wouldn't do without orders.

Very soon, Prometheus was boarded by young soldiers in smart suits, desert camo rather than plain black, their silver plasma rifles embossed with flags, American Naval insignia, and at last their callsigns, which weren't quite as dignified as the mythological callsigns used by German units. Kyle noted one of the soldiers had the callsign "Porky." In spite of their less dignified callsigns, the Americans were quite friendly and efficient, and cleared the Medusas through security quite fast, and likewise cleared the weapons on board, which the Americans clearly all understood the entire diverse selection of. Of course, Buchner had already inspected the weapons beforehand, but rules are rules.

"Right then," the leader of the little unit of inspectors who'd boarded Prometheus instructed, "head down to the pad, join everyone else as they come, and be ready to follow orders."

The Medusas offloaded, finding that the landing pad was slowly but very surely being filled with the hundreds to thousands of soldiers who made up the various units called in for the op. Kyle wandered a bit, trying to gain any information on the situation. The languages of the various units were mostly American English, various dialects of German, and Japanese, with a few other European languages here and there, as the reader no doubt expects by now. Once again as the reader no doubt

expects, the American units stayed together, making inflammatory comments on behalf of the Germans and Japanese units they were "forced" to work with. No one at all seemed to know what the mission was.

Kyle eventually regrouped with Harune and Joshie, who had wandered some distance in order to make the same assessments he had. They walked eventually past Anthony Muehlbauer's ship The Calypso, which looked like the standard Hanebu, or "flying saucer" type craft, several hundred feet from one end to the other, bulletproof matte black on top and ivory white on the bottom, spotlessly clean and very sleek.

"She's a beauty," Harune said, running his hand up and down a landing gear strut, "I hope I can get Anthony to give me a look inside before all this is over."

In time of course, another announcement went up over some sort of intercom; "All units, regroup outside your ships and line up. Inspections have been completed, prepare to march, you have 11 minutes to regroup. Stragglers will be court martialed."

"This bitch sure is serious," Joshie quipped, though like everyone else, he fell in line.

It took nowhere near the allowed 11 minutes for all of the soldiers to regroup at the feed of their ships, guns in hand or adjusted over their backs, medals in place, caps straightened, etcetera. Most had been standing boredly for eight minutes by the time the 11 minutes had ended. However, the delay gave Kyle time to do a visual survey, and see that there must be about 2,000 soldiers present. Either the Americans were being ludicrously cautious, or the more likely option; the mission ahead was massive. If this was the case, it was a good sign that the Medusas had been called.

After the 11 minutes had been reached, a whistle was blown, and all soldiers were ordered to turn to one side, and march

toward the monstrous hangar bay door in the side of the crater, where they'd be greeted with a musical retinue to welcome them to Fort McCord. Always time for music.

The hangar bay was surely the largest Kyle had ever seen. Only the central portion, which the soldiers entered, was lit. A portion ahead, and large parts right and left, were dark. Just enough light remained that one could just make out that three each orchestras and choral groups had been set up, one right, one left, one forward, the orchestras on the hangar bay floor, the choral groups on risers.

"Everyone please turn to the right for the American retinue," the announcement intercom said, and all did, turning and seeing the right side of the hangar body light up, showing the American choral group and orchestra, whom Kyle noted weren't in uniform, merely dress clothes.

"Holy shit," an American in a unit lined up next to the Medusas hissed, "that's the goddamn Mormon Tabernacle!"

"Blasphemy, Private!" hissed another American in the unit. Kyle smiled irreverently in support of the "blasphemous" soldier.

The retinue was quite impressive. Each choral group and orchestra was allowed a single song, and as the reader no doubt expects by now, in addition to the initial American song, there was a German song and a Japanese song. The American song was "Battle Hymn of The Republic," and the Japanese song was "Hohei no Honryo." As I'm sure most of my readers are familiar with "Battle Hymn of The Republic," and as I've already recounted "Hohei no Honryo" in the 8th chapter of Volume 2 of this book, I'll only be recounting the text of the German song played in the retinue, which was the following.

Auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein
Und das heißt:

Erika.
Heiß von hunderttausend kleinen Bienelein
Wird umschwärmt:
Erika.
Denn ihr Herz ist voller Süßigkeit,
Zarter Duft entströmt dem Blütenkleid.
Auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein
Und das heißt:
Erika.

In der Heimat wohnt ein kleines Mägdelein
Und das heißt:
Erika.
Dieses Mädel ist mein treues Schätzelein
Und mein Glück:
Erika.
Wenn das Heidekraut rot-lila blüht,
Singe ich zum Gruß ihr dieses Lied.
Auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein
Und das heißt:
Erika.

In mein'm Kämmerlein blüht auch ein Blümelein
Und das heißt:
Erika.
Schon beim Morgengrau'n sowie beim Dämmerschein
Schaut's mich an:
Erika.
Und dann ist es mir, als spräch' es laut:
"Denkst du auch an deine kleine Braut?"
In der Heimat weint um dich ein Mägdelein
Und das heißt:

Erika!

As they always must, the pleasant musical interlude ended. The soldiers were instructed to turn back in the direction of the hangar bay door, and to look up above. As they turned, the portions of the hangar bay which held the various musical groups were once again darkened, and as far as I'm able to recall, were never seen again.

Positioned above the hangar bay door, easily 150 feet off the ground, was an enormous catwalk, which was lined up and down by innumerable higher officers of the three participating off-world nations. Kyle saw among them, positioned more or less at the center, Emmermann and Hayao Takahashi, and an American he didn't recognize. Standing at Emmermann's side was another bearded German, whose face had a look Kyle couldn't immediately place, but soon did; this brown haired, bearded admiral who glittered like a Christmas tree with medals was a Muehlbauer, or looked like one. In the Japanese block was, of course, Sakura Arasaka. It was the American, a big red haired man, who stepped to the front to finally begin the briefing.

"Greetings my good soldiers," the American greeted, "I am Admiral Joseph McGoneagle. I'm your commander on this operation, along with my colleagues here. How was your trip?"

"Smooth sailing all around, Sir!" shouted someone on the ground.

"Good, good," McGoneagle said, "now on with the briefing."

With this, an enormous screen rolled out from the underside of the catwalk. This screen came to about halfway down the hangar bay door, and onto the screen, the proper briefing was at last projected; the mission, as Kyle had somehow known it must, had to do with the Orion Syndicate. The key human powers in the Solar System, the Germans, Japanese, and Americans had

declared war. During The Black Terror, the Syndicate had enjoyed a modicum of protection by never declaring an allegiance, but now, in the interest of appearing to cooperate, the powers were beginning the task of removing the Syndicate from Mars, starting with the eradication of all cells in the southern hemisphere. The Intel from the Medusas must have had a part in knowing where these cells were, as reports of any possible cells from The Glass Hub's patrons had always been passed along to Emmermann. Now all the years of what had seemed like barely more than gossip were at last paying off.

"Alright," McGonoeagle said once the video briefing had ended, "this is not a high speed strike. Most of the time, you'll be sitting on your asses and waiting for orders. Your units will be sent into battle when you're needed. And in the meantime, you'll be learning to get along. Now, you'll follow some of our greeting party to your barracks. I hope you'll all learn something from this exercise. Thank you for your service."

"Have to hand it to the Americans," Max muttered behind Kyle.

"What's that?" Cheng whispered back.

"They at least make you feel wanted," Max said ruefully.

"Alright," a friendly young woman's voice said into a megaphone at their back, "at ease. Everyone come with me to your new quarters. Feel free to mingle as you walk."

All, or at least most, at last relaxed, and turned to follow the young officer with the megaphone, out of the hangar bay through a set of double doors. They found themselves in a fairly sprawling, all white hallway, which served as something of a thoroughfare for the whole of Fort McCord, or at least this level. On this level were the standard armories, map rooms, barber shops, locker rooms, comms centers, repair shops, higher up's offices, canteens, etcetera. As they passed the map rooms, Kyle

overheard one German remarking to his friend that this must be the place where they'd plotted the murder of his grandmother and her brothers. Other than this, Kyle didn't hear much on the tour; he was rather too busy staring at the young female Japanese officer walking in front of him.

Presently, the column of soldiers, lead by the cheerful young officer, reached an expanse in the thoroughfare through the base. On each side were more sets of double doors, each one marked as a hangar bay of some number or other. The officer leading explained that the hangars had been converted into barracks, and that each bunk bed had been marked with a set of numbers- the number of the bunk that each soldier had been assigned to was to be found on their tags. While mingling within the barracks was allowed, switching was most certainly not, and doing so was a serious offense. The orientation tour ended with the assurance that the weapons each unit had brought had been catalogued and moved to the armory after being taken away on the landing pad, to be redistributed when any unit was called. And so everyone went into the barracks, the men to the right, the women to the left.

The barracks were rather as most everyone had no doubt feared; hangar bays with row upon row upon row of bunks, stacked five high with not much room to move between them. Given the size of the hanger, the reason for placing the bunks so closely together was a total mystery. But it was what it was, and it must be accepted. Kyle did so and set about finding his bunk, and meeting his bunkmates.

Kyle's bunkmates were good enough, it turned out; another German whose name has been lost, but who was a violin player, and a gigantic American with black hair who was probably named Rogers, who talked in his sleep but made up for it with

personality, are the only two of Kyle's four bunkmates who have been retained in memory.

"Hey! Kyle!" a familiar voice shouted as Kyle climbed down from his bunk. Kyle turned, seeing Georg Nimmer running up to him, his arms spread, and Kyle pushed over to greet his oldest friend.

"Been way too long Brother," Kyle said, "how the fuck are you?"

"I have a bunkmate from hell, otherwise alright" Georg said, "The Old Man insisted I sleep with everyone else. He doesn't want to look favoritist or some such horseshit. But it's good. We're going to be working together!"

"Gods," Kyle joked dryly, "do the punishments never fucking end?"

For the next few days, not much occured, for the Medusas anyway. The units were called up either one by one or never more than a few at a time, via the red lights on their bunks which flashed at the necessary intervals, and of course not much was said about what went on. There were no op-sec protocol in place; the members of the units were free to talk to each other as much as they wished for once. But old habits die hard, and for the Americans, there was often a language barrier, as few spoke German or Japanese. The Germans and Japanese spoke English of course, but again, old habits die hard, and the distrust of decades isn't ended in days.

This isn't to say no fun was had; there most certainly was. Soldiers are soldiers, whatever their differences, and so smuggled alcohol and carnal goods were always available, if you knew the right person, and the Medusas always did. And as always again, music and sex were in abundance. In a way, it was almost nostalgic for Kyle, having to find closets to meet his ladies in, or simply have sex openly in the barracks, with a crowd forming to

cheer them on, as often was the case, half the time with Kyle in the crowd doing the cheering. Kyle didn't tell his conquests he was synthetic; they didn't need to know, and it was refreshing to spend time with women who had no idea who or what he was.

Excitement came over a Martian week into the Medusas arrival at Fort McCord. This first incident of excitement occured not as a part of the mission, but as a disappearance. The lights on a number of bunks began flashing. Kyle recognized one as belonging to one of the crew of the Calypso, and so assumed this unit must be one of the ones being called, then thought no more of it.

A little while later, Kyle was sat in his bunk, tuning a harmonica belonging to one of the friends he'd made, when he saw Max, Joshie, Kovac, and Harune rushing to him. Kyle set the harmonica down and hopped from the bunk to greet them, seeing they looked quite concerned.

"Dad," Max said, "Anthony's gone walkabout. No one can find him!"

Kyle: "Have they checked the shitter? Or the closets?"

"Of course they have," Kovac snapped, and now Kyle paid attention.

"How long has he been missing?" Kyle asked, switching to mission mode.

"No one knows," Joshie said, "he didn't report for duty, and so a search has gone up. They're tossing his locker now. They've dragged his crew into a map room."

"Have they checked his bunk?" Kyle asked, knowing that the bunk, not the locker, is where a soldier actually hides his secrets.

"No," Harune said with meaningful tone, and then quite suddenly vanished with Max and Joshie, "jumping" to some other location.

"What the fuck-" Kyle began.

"Don't ask," Kovac said.

Kyle knew full well where Harune and the others had gone, as he'd been about to order it himself. He'd have to have a talk with them about chain of command. Later.

"Right," Kyle said, "split up, let's get the others in on this. How well known is this?"

"We're in a box," Kovac shrugged, looking unsure of herself for the first time since Kyle had known her; "how contained can they keep it?"

Kyle nodded slowly. Intuitively, he thought this was all an overreaction. Anthony Muehlbauer must have slipped into an unlocked ship with some girl, and would come back looking very silly soon enough. But no. This was much more serious, Kyle knew. And so he activated.

Kyle went through the barracks fairly fast, finding the Medusas present. There weren't many, at this time of day. Most had gone off to do other activities after it had become clear that they weren't being sent out that day. Kyle was still conducting his sweep when he saw a crowd of guards moving through the barracks, and more significant, Emmermann, Admiral McGoneagle, and the German admiral who looked like a Muehlbauer walking with purpose towards the exit of the barracks, with Max among them, McGoneagle occasionally glancing at him in a very perturbed way. Emmermann caught Kyle's gaze and nodded him over.

"What's all this about, Sir?" Kyle asked, addressing Emmermann.

"We want to know what your man found in the deserter's bed," McGoneagle cut in, "please follow us."

Kyle didn't much like the sound of this, and so naturally stepped in line immediately, and not just because he was unable

to disobey. If any trouble was happening, he hoped he could in some way draw fire off of Max. As Kyle walked with the party, he saw Joshie, but with a quick shake of his head, stopped Joshie from joining the party.

Kyle, Emmermann, McGoneagle, Max, and the mysterious presumed Muehlbauer left the barracks, into the thoroughfare of Fort McCord, and down it to one of the map rooms. Inside it were the usual cork boards, desks, and holographic map table at the center. The authority figures rounded one side of the table, and instinctively, Kyle and Max stayed on the other.

"You can relax," Emmermann said, "even if Mac wanted to punish you, you're German citizens."

Admiral McGoneagle adopted a perturbed smile before he spoke.

McGoneagle: "I'm aware you know Emmermann. I assume you know Muehlbauer."

The now confirmed Muehlbauer shook hands with Kyle and Max in turn; his given name, it turned out, was Alf.

Max: "Pleasure to meet you Sir."

Kyle: "Just so. Are you related to the deserter, if I may ask?"

Alf: "I'm father to him and his two siblings. We're not close."

That was a hell of a way to put it, Kyle thought to himself, thinking of the tortures he'd known had been leveled at Mark, Anthony, and Isabel at Camp Hero before the revolution, now knowing that they had a father who could have protected them with a single phone call.

McGoneagle: "Mr. Bronsley, you were seen rooting through the deserter's bed. Good initiative, though you should have allowed chain of command to conduct the search. What did you find?"

Max: "Absolutely fuck all. Or rather, nothing of any interest. A notebook, a flask, a lighter and cigarettes, and a few prophylactics. I'm not sure any of those things are strictly regulation items, but myself and every other man here has them."

Alf: "Did you unroll the cigarettes? Did you open the lighter or the prophylactic packets?"

Max: "I would have done, but you three caught up to me."

Kyle admired the way Max spoke to these authority figures; honest and straightforward, but with just the slightest hint of accusation.

Kyle: "If I may ask, Sirs; what is the point of all this?"

Emmermann: "Daedalus, very soon, we're going to be mobilizing a mass search force. We're making sure you two can be included. So; how well did you know the deserter?"

Kyle: "Not well at all. His brother is a hero, and always will be in our minds. Is that a problem?"

Emmermann: "No, I expect not. You may go."

And that, apparently, was that. Kyle and Max left, leaving the three admirals alone in the map room.

"Well that was fucking bizarre," Kyle said upon entering the thoroughfare once again. Max merely nodded, clearly thinking.

"Were Joshie and Harune seen?" Kyle asked, switching purposely to telepathy. Max answered with an almost imperceptible nod of affirmation.

The announcement went up not long later; all members of about 10 units were called to report to the armory immediately, for immediate suiting up and duty. No announcement was made as regards the actual cause, but by then, it must have been universally known. As Kovac had said; they were in a box. In any event, the Medusas were one of the units called, alongside The Black Crows, and others who have been lost to memory.

The armory of Fort McCord was much like the other armories Kyle had seen, though not particularly large, and indeed Tsurabaya made a few rather dirty remarks on the size of Fort McCord's armory compared to the armory at Fort Worden which he had built.

The armor provided was the same as that which had been worn by The Black Crows; matte black, heavily streamlined power armor which was intelligent to some degree and fitted its own pieces together and then tailored itself to the body slipping into it. Kyle, and no doubt every German and Japanese present, felt very dirty slipping into it, as though one was betraying one's own race, though it was a relief to see that The Black Crows were still distinguishable from the rest, as their armor sets had silver crow's feathers painted on back. Everyone also received a rail rifle, a rail pistol, and a plasma combat knife. As people were visually indistinguishable once in the armor, they called out to each other and regrouped using telepathy, which seemed to work well enough, and within 10 minutes of the call, the units were ready for action. Georg had apparently been sent in, and rallied with the Medusas.

Anthony's escape route had been discovered, it turned out. Anthony had somehow gotten ahold of an energy weapon, and had burned a hole in a grate covering an old drainage tunnel in one of the outside craters, and according to his tracking implants had used this tunnel to flee to somewhere beneath Fort McCord. All units mobilized were to proceed with extreme caution, as the Antoids had a settlement in this cave system, likely guarded by spiders.

"Fucking useless," Harune commented, "he's long gone by now."

"This is procedure," Hofnitz reminded, and they proceeded.

Harune was entirely right, as he generally always was, even in his still somewhat stunted state. Anthony's implants were found in a bloody pile deep in one grotto, with neither Anthony nor a single Antoid anywhere in sight. The caverns were scoured for miles, well beyond treaty borders, not to mention all standards of safety. But nothing so much as a single hair could be found, and with all tracking data inaccessible, there wasn't much hope either. No, Anthony was gone, and with him, the last of the Muehlbauers in Project Phoenix. For his part, Kyle wished him well, in his way. He knew this would be a popular opinion to all but those who apparently "mattered."

In spite of this bump in the road, the special joint operation to remove the Orion Syndicate from all locations south of the equator of Mars was, all things considered, a smash success. Of the soldiers chosen, only 20 were killed in total; seven American, nine German, four Japanese. There were perhaps two dozen Syndicate cells cleared out. The Medusas, plus Georg, cleared out seven. I suppose it falls on me to describe this undertaking, in honor of the fallen.

Time rather dragged for the Medusas in waiting for the missions to begin. It must have taken nearly two Martian weeks for the first call. Once the action had begun however, there was nowhere near enough time between each strike.

The first strike, and most which followed, blend together greatly in my mind. I can say that six of the seven took place in rather nondescript locations; underground cave systems, occupied by the Syndicate. One resembled a laboratory, with massive beakers and the like on blue and orange crystal tabletops. In this one was a series of Martian native humans in portable stasis tubes. What became of them is unknown to me, as the units had strict orders to not touch or investigate any equipment found in these locations. The remaining five were what seemed to be

barracks housing. It was clear that the Syndicate didn't consider Mars important, given the small sizes of most of their housing.

An odd thing was that the Syndicate communication networks never saw the strikes coming, at least those which the Medusas partook in, which made Kyle wonder why. While Prometheus and no doubt the other ships had excellent stealth capabilities, surely an organization as massive and connected as The Orion Syndicate must be able to communicate that all of their bases were being assaulted?

On one of the strikes which the Medusas carried out, Emmermann and McGoneagle gave them a shocking task; capture the largest Draconian they could. In some of these cells, members of the "royal" Draconian species could be found. And so finding the largest possible specimen in any given cell wasn't difficult; what was difficult was the capture. Emmermann provided the Medusas with a tranq gun which he claimed would put an army to sleep.

Either Emmermann had been exaggerating, or he'd greatly underestimated the strength of an angry "royal" Draco. The Medusas took several injuries, which had to be fixed with robotic surgery, but they were successful after Jack and Georg climbed the back of the monster and knocked it unconscious.

I should here note what species were present; as the reader has no doubt come to expect, the usual Iguanoids were in abundance, as were "Grays," the latter of whom seemed to be subservient, as they were seen only roaming to and fro, carrying this and that. Kyle saw one collared and led on a leash by an Iguanoid. Present also were a number of other reptilian species, including one which resembled tortoises and a subset of Naga which looked like a Scarlet King Snake. A member of this last species killed a young American woman on another unit which

the Medusas were once sent in with, by coiling around her and squeezing her to paste in an instant, even through her armor.

Also present were members of at least two Orionite species; Rigelians, and, in much less frequency, a few Bellatrixese. It was hard to know what roles exactly the members of these species filled, as the orders were always to kill on site. Once, Kyle got quote severely cut up by an obviously enhanced Rigelian female with a plasma knife.

"Hello you beauty," McGoneagle said as the Draconian was unloaded from Prometheus; "Let's hear what you've got to say to me."

There is one last of these strikes whose location was unique enough that I'll describe it. This attack, which occured very near the end of the special joint operation, and took seven units, denoting the large size of the strike.

The seven units sent in were required, it turned out, not due so much due to the numbers of Syndicate present; the numbers were not much larger than usual. No, it was due to the unique location, which was a mid-sized underground city, seemingly built by the Syndicate, or at least someone highly influenced by the Draco architectural style. All the buildings were pointed and highly geometric, and built entirely of a black glass-like stone which looked like obsidian, but must have been much stronger. Kyle didn't have time to analyze the interiors of these buildings, but one was unmistakably a cybernetics factory, like a smaller version of the one where Kyle had been built.

In time of course, the Medusas returned to Fort Worden, the joint operation concluding about two Martian months after it had begun. The finishing touches on The Glass Hub's repairs, which Emmermann was financing, were still being carried out. Among other things, he had already thought of the force field and holographic cover Kyle had decided planned to ask about.

"Stay ready," Emmermann advised Kyle, Jack, and Max, "there will be others."

Upon the return to Fort Worden, Kyle, Max, and Harune went back to their apartment. Here, Harune wordlessly pulled a piece of paper from inside his jacket and handed it over to Kyle. It was a song, and Kyle's eyes widened at the lyrics.

"Did you write this one?" Kyle asked.

"No," Harune said, "Anthony did. I found it in his bunk after he left."

"You... kept it?" Kyle asked, feeling slightly worried about the rules Harune was breaking.

"They'd have confiscated it," Harune shrugged, "it felt wrong to let that happen."

"I had no idea," Max said, "I wash my fucking hands."

"Good," Harune said almost bitterly, "you don't have the range for it anyway. I want to record it Father. Me and Joshie."

Slowly, Kyle nodded. It was perhaps best if Harune and Joshie did so, and as fast as possible, rather than continuing to hide a song written by a man ruled "traitor in absentia."

"It's a good piece," Kyle said, "get Joshie. I'll come with you to the recording studio."

Harune gathered Joshie and the instruments they'd be using, and thus they proceeded to record the song which they called "Anthony's Last Gift," as it not only was Anthony's song, but it was written for his beloved ship and crew, with musical and vocal styles honoring both his German roots and American home. The song languished in obscurity within Project Phoenix, and likely all the Breakaway. However, in our world, it's the following classic.

To sail on a dream on a crystal clear ocean,
To ride on the crest of a wild raging storm,

To work in the service of life and the living,
In search of the answers to questions unknown.
To be part of the movement,
Part of the growing,
Part of beginning to understand.

Aye, Calypso, the places you've been to,
The things that you've shown us,
The stories you tell.
Aye, Calypso, I sing to your spirit,
The men who have served you so long and so well.

Yodle-ey de-de-dee-dee-dee-dee,
Yodle-ey hee-hoo.

Like the night sky who guides you,
You bring us beside you
To light up the darkness and show us the way.
For though we are strangers in your silent world,
To live on the land we must learn from the sea.
To be true as the tide,
And free as a wind swell,
Joyful and loving,
In letting it be.

Aye, Calypso, the places you've been to,
The things that you've been to,
The things that you've shown us,
The stories you tell.
Aye, Calypso, I sing to your spirit,
The men who have served you so long and so well.

Aye, Calypso, the places you've been to,
The things that you've shown us,
The stories you tell.
Aye, Calypso, I sing to your spirit,
The men who have served you so long and so well.

Yodle-ey de-de-dee-dee-dee-dee,
Yodle-ey hee-hoo.
Yodle-ey de-de-dee-dee-dee-dee,
Yodle-ey hee-hoo.

I feel the need to next draw the reader’s attention to another disappearance of someone within Kyle's circle, this one much closer than Anthony, whose loss was much more felt. I can't date this disappearance exactly, but I can say that it happened soon after Kyle took Jason to the newly renovated Glass Hub as a celebration of Jason's 19th birthday, which he'd missed, but more than made up for with the celebration and promised hooker.

News of the disappearance came one evening, when Kyle and the boys were sat in their apartment, when a message came in on their glass pads; "Security breach; remain in place."

"Should we worry?" Max asked.

"Not until we're told to," Kyle shrugged.

Being "told to" wasn't long to come for Kyle's household, unfortunately. Running footsteps pattered outside, and then a frantic pounding on Kyle and family's door. Kyle flung open the door and was greeted with Sondra, wearing the unmistakable look of one who is concerned for another's well being. It was the first time he'd seen her have such a look, and his heart sank to the floor, knowing what it must mean.

"It's Jason!" Sondra exclaimed; "You have to come help us look, right now! Bring your little golden boy!"

Kyle couldn't imagine which of his sons Sondra considered as his "little golden boy," and in any case, nothing could have prevented both Max and Harune from following Kyle as he ran after Sondra down the paths through the base. None of them was so much as wearing shoes, much less work clothes, not that any was thinking of it at the time as they ran, a good ways along the fort to the ocean of bunkers, one of which they burst into.

Inside this bunker was a "situation room," with monitors lining most walls except one which held maps, and in the center, a holographic projection table. A number of persons, including Roth and Jimmy, were crowded about the monitors, and some other soldiers Kyle didn't know had crowded around a 3D map already pulled up on the table.

"What's the situation?" Kyle asked, approaching the table with his sons, nothing that the map was of somewhere deep within uninhabited Siberia.

"Who the fuck are you?" the soldier at the head of the table demanded.

"He's cleared," Jimmy said, waving his hand without looking back over his shoulder.

With a shrug, the soldier at the head of the table explained the situation. Just minutes ago, an alarm had been set off; the Fort Worden computer had detected an unauthorized gate dial, to an unauthorized location. A check if the security camera had shown Jason leaving through the gate, at the end of a gun; behind the gun was Belinda Gillies, one of the two women whom Sondra had brought back to Camp Hero when she'd returned with Jason. While the gate dial location was known, neither Jason nor Belinda's implants could be raised, and the

satellite imagery showed the area as nothing but frozen mountains, with only a few dirt roads and not so much as a gas station or hiker's lodge for tens of miles.

"This is cowboy bullshit," Jimmy muttered to himself, then taking a deep breath said; "we go immediately. I'll go suit up. Kyle, Max, Harune, you come with me. The Roths stay. You're both too close. I have spoken."

Kyle, Max, and Harune followed Jimmy out of the situation room, Jimmy typing furiously on his wrist computer, no doubt summoning as many soldiers as possible, many of whom joined them on the path to the armory, which by now held not only weapons, but suits of armor and a space to suit up.

"Can you see him?" Kyle asked Harune as they walked, knowing full well that if he could have, he'd have said, as would all others on base capable of nonlinear sight, and so Harune's guilty head shake wasn't a surprise.

The soldiers all geared up very fast. Kyle had to admire the way Jimmy threw himself into this situation that all deep down knew was, in some way or another, completely hopeless.

Jimmy gave that order that all soldiers wish to hear, until they finally hear it; "Every man for himself, fire at will, just come back alive."

The coordinates of the gate were dialed, authorized this time, and the search column, led by Jimmy, proceeded through, rifles raised and ready for almost anything, or so they hoped.

The search party emerged in a snowy valley, as they'd known they must. The meeting of expectations ended there. Far from the desolate wilderness which had been seen on the mapping system, the mountains were lined with concrete and metal embattlements, which were full of silos, the tops lined with manned machine gun turrets.

Most shocking however was that which filled the valley; dozens if not hundreds of gates, of various colors and sizes, all free-floating and unframed. The rescue party had stumbled into some kind of "gate control" facility. And any hope they may have had of stealthily finding Jason was crushed in a matter of seconds.

Practically instantly, shouts went up from around the battlements, and within seconds, the turrets had operators. 50 caliber shells rained down on the rescue party practically as soon as they had arrived on the scene.

"Scatter! Fight back!" Jimmy screamed, too late as both things had already begun.

For a moment, it seemed as though perhaps not all was lost. The 50 caliber shells, good as they were, weren't strong enough to pierce the armor worn by the search party, nor the personal force field shields they carried. But no matter how good one's armor is, there is always a weapon designed specifically to destroy it.

The weapon which destroyed the German made power armor came not from above, but from ground level. From several of the gates around the field emerged soldiers, wearing power armor similar to the German made armor worn by the rescue party, though slightly bulkier and dark green rather than black, with Russian Federation flag patches on the left side breastplates. These soldiers carried fat, stubby, grenade launcher-like rifles, which fired 40x46 millimeter plasma projectiles. These melted the armor of the rescue party, along with their bodies.

"Rescue the dead!" Jimmy shouted, or something to that effect.

For his part, Kyle raised his rifle and immediately took out five of the Russian soldiers with a single headshot each, as was his signature. He was relieved to see that the plasma rifles

carried by the Project Phoenix assets could at least pierce the armor of the Russians, giving them a slight fighting chance, or so it looked at first. Kyle saw Max once charge a Russian with his Arasaka sword and decapitate said Russian, then throw his head back through the gate to Fort Worden. Kyle supposed he must be thinking of interrogation, and so he did the same on several specimens. He saved several of the bodies of the Project Phoenix dead by hurling them through the portal as well.

Within a few minutes of course, it became clear that the mission was hopeless. It seemed that for every Russian that the Project Phoenix assets gunned or cut down, three more showed up. After a bit, they weren't any longer just coming from the few gates they'd used initially, but from under the ground, from the silo doors in the embattlements on the mountainsides, and from the helicopters which began appearing, dotting the sky like cacophonous black ants, soldiers dropping from each one. It was an utterly unwinnable battle just through numbers, though one on one the Project Phoenix assets beat a Russian every time.

"Retreat! Take the dead!" Jimmy inevitably ordered, and so gathering up the dead and immobilized, all charged back through the gate, back to Fort Worden's gate room. A few brave Russians followed, but were gunned down very quickly inside the gate room, the gate closing decisively.

"Lock that fucking location," Jimmy ordered the gate technician who sat in her usual space behind the monitor beside the gate, breaking the moment of silence.

"Alright," Jimmy said at last, "this isn't over. Medics, take out dead and put them on ice a few hours. The Ruskies are all your priority. I want those sons of bitches in virtual interrogation loops within the hour."

"I know I'm not on the payroll Sir," Max said, "but I'd like to be on the interrogation team."

"Of course," Jimmy said.

"You heard the man!" One soldier barked; "move your asses!"

"I'll go tell Sondra," Kyle quietly volunteered to Jimmy, who promised in turn that he'd inform Roth.

Kyle quickly pulled off his armor, which was on over his clothes anyway, and headed above ground and to the situation room. Somehow Kyle knew that Sondra would still be there, pacing and likely popping a few Apocrypha. He was right, and she was the only one present, the room having been emptied.

"Did you bring my boy home to me?" Sondra demanded at Kyle's entry.

"I'm afraid not," Kyle said solemnly.

"How could you?" Sondra demanded

"I'm afraid no one we know will be seeing our boy for a long time. Maybe not ever," Kyle said.

"How dare you? How fucking dare you come to see me without bringing him home?" Sondra demanded; "Oh Gods, Jason, where are you?"

Sondra then began to cry, with a despondent look on her face that told Kyle she was beginning to accept what had happened. But for his part, Kyle still had something to say.

"You know," Kyle said angrily, stepping up to Sondra and pulling her hands from her face to force eye contact, "how fucking dare you, is the question I'd be asking. If you hadn't brought him into this life- if you hadn't been such a selfish, stupid, drug-addled fucking bitch, none of us would be here right now! So fucking own it!"

In rage, Sondra's fist flew in the direction of Kyle's face, Kyle catching her by the wrist before she could land a blow, then squeezing Sondra's arm, just hard enough to cause considerable pain.

"No," Kyle said, "you don't get to hurt anyone else today. You fucking heard what I said."

With this, Kyle half shoved, half threw Sondra into a chair, which broke on impact.

"Get out of my fucking sight!" Sondra hissed as she pulled herself to a half seated position on the situation room's concrete floor.

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Kyle said, turning and leaving.

Kyle didn't let anyone see him cry, but he certainly did so for a moment once he'd reached deep enough into the woods. They weren't tears of sadness; Kyle didn't feel sad for someone who wasn't dead. No, these were tears and groans and roars of anger. Anger at himself, at both of the Roths, at Fort Worden's failed security, at the mysterious Russians who had taken Jason, etcetera. It's an anger he still has not entirely released.

As it turned out, no one in Project Phoenix ever did hear from Jason again, or at least none had as recently as summer 2023. This is not to say that there are no remnants to be found of him. No, there remains a song, written by Ivan Roth, which made its way up the charts both on and off planet. Kyle only heard of it years later, at a Camp Hero concert, and later inquiries have shown that the song is indeed about Jason. That song is the following.

Carry on my wayward son,
There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest,
Don't you cry no more.

Once I rose above the noise and confusion
Just to get a glimpse beyond this illusion.

I was soaring ever higher,
But I flew too high.
Though my eyes could see, I still was a blind man,
Though my mind could think, I still was a madman.
I hear the voices when I'm dreaming,
I can hear them say:

Carry on my wayward son,
There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest,
Don't you cry no more.

Masquerading as a man with a reason,
My charade is the event of the season.
And if I claim to be a wise man,
It surely means that I don't know.
On a stormy sea of moving emotion,
Tossed about, I'm like a ship on the ocean.
I set a course for winds of fortune,
But I hear the voices say:

Carry on my wayward son,
There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest,
Don't you cry no more.

You will always remember,
Nothing equals the splendor.
Now your life's no longer empty,
Surely heaven waits for you.

Carry on my wayward son,

There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest,
Don't you cry no more.
No more!

Author's note. A fairly happy chapter for myself in the first part, and rather gut wrenching towards the end. If perhaps any of my readers are aware of Jason Roth's whereabouts, please let me know.

Chapter 17

As my reader may be thinking by now, the years of a streak of successes which the Medusas enjoyed, unbroken by any deaths or tragedies, wasn't to last. Perhaps it was cockiness. Perhaps it was Harune being off his game. Perhaps it was just bad fucking luck, or perhaps it was unavoidable. But reality well and truly came collapsing in on the Medusas in what must have been some time in autumn 1997.

It seems almost poetic now, the sort of person who called in to The Eagle's Claw one dull seeming afternoon to give the Medusas their contract. It was a young, brisk, thickly bearded Japanese man who looked as though he had better things to do. He reminded Kyle very much of a young Tsurabaya, when he'd first met him a lifetime ago on a glass pad screen before that all important mission to Okinawa.

"Greetings," the young man, who sat in an obviously holographic environment of a tropical island, said; "Have I reached the Medusa Unit?"

"You have," Jack said, stepping in front of the house's television screen, as did Kyle, who asked the all important; "Who is calling?"

"Who I am is unimportant and-" the young man began.

"Humor us," Kyle said as he typed in a message to the other unit members, rallying them to the screen.

"Tachibana," the young man shrugged, "Eiji Tachibana, and as I was saying, I'm calling on behalf of Arasaka Robotics."

By that point, most of the others had gathered around the screen attentively.

“You have our attention,” Kyle said with a patronizing grin.

“I thought I might,” Tachibana said, “are any of you familiar with New Kanazawa?”

“I was born there,” Tsurabaya said, stepping to the front of the group, “I haven’t been back in decades. Why?”

“You’ll get to go home then,” Tachibana explained, and thus the briefing began.

New Kanazawa, in Tsurabaya’s absence, had become an Arasaka Robotics company town, just as Auntie Fumiko had stated, and thus, certain laws had been passed. Among them was an outright ban on all Daishono Industries products. This had thus caused considerable uproar when several young women, sharing an apartment, had been murdered in an apparent robbery and, when having their brains and implants removed for data withdrawal to find data on the murderer, a number of Daishono implants had been among them.

“What are we to do?” Jack asked; “Find where these implants are coming from?”

“Precisely,” Tachibana said, “there’s only a few possible places that would have the clout and cash to fence illegal cybernetic upgrades, all of them yakuza clubs.”

Kyle: “How do we get in?”

Tachibana: “From the way the New Kanazawa underworld works, it’s simple enough. Dress rich and show up at these clubs, act like you know what you’re doing. You’ll look out of place at these kind of places, soon enough you’ll be approached by the criminal element who’ll think you’re looking for them, which you are. Listen and learn, take it from there.”

“Sounds like a good way to get shot in the brainstem,” someone, probably Max, muttered.

“I tend to agree,” Kyle said, “which is why we’ll take our time.”

“You do what you have to do,” Tachibana sighed, “sending the list as we speak. Leave tomorrow please. Tachibana out.”

“He’s charming,” Buchner said dryly.

“Coming from Miss Mary Sunshine herself, I guess we have to all agree,” Kyle said in reprimand. Far be it from him to give Buchner a break.

The rest of the day passed as usual, and so did the morning, when the Medusas packed and headed for Prometheus, the list of yakuza joints in hand, Tachibana having sent it immediately after the conversation. At one point, Harune said he had an odd feeling about the operation coming, a feeling which most of the others seemed to share, which Kyle for his part tried to chalk up to a dislike of Arasaka company towns. A weak excuse, but it worked, and anyway, it wasn’t as if turning down the contract was an option. And so all dutifully boarded the ship and embarked for New Kanazawa, preparing for a very long flight, as New Kanazawa was located somewhere on the galactic rim.

“What should we expect?” Kyle asked Tsurabaya, once the Medusas had left the bridge as to not disturb David’s navigation.

“I don’t know,” Tsurabaya said truthfully, “I left in what I think was the 1890s on Earth. Only had a short visit back in what I worked out at the time was the early 1950s. It was a company town by then already.”

The flight must have taken about 30 hours, by Kyle’s estimation, which of course was not really an estimation, as his computer brain was perfectly capable of keeping time down to the femtosecond. But whatever the case, most of the Medusas kept to their bunks, reading, writing, or in the men’s barracks, watching holographic pornography on their wrist computers. In other words, it was a totally normal transit.

Eventually, the initial leg of the trip ended, and David gave the usual announcement.

David: “Ladies and gentlemen, please report to the bridge. We are arriving at New Kanazawa.”

Everyone, already dressed having just finished breakfast, gathered their bags and weapons, and grouped on the bridge. They saw that Prometheus was in the orbit of an Earthlike planet, covered in large part by oceans. David had pulled the ship to the side of the planet which was nighttime, and was lowering toward the lights of a massive city, split between two islands. Either the city was the size of a medium sized country, or the planet wasn’t very big. A glance at the horizon upon entering the atmosphere showed it was the latter option at play. Also of note was the lack of stars in the sky, caused not just by light pollution but also by virtue of the planet being in the galactic rim, where few stars were present.

New Kanazawa proved to be a mostly standard looking Breakaway city; massive, futuristic, and built out rather than up. One uncommon feature was that personal transit looked more common here than the places Kyle was used to, with numerous shuttles and flying cars at all levels of the city, which was on two islands, both covered by force fields, not counting a third, equally covered island which was a spaceport. Public transit was definitely still in existence however, and equally visible in the form of elevated monorails and tubes of what appeared to be black glass, which when one watched them, one saw had trains of some kind moving through them.

The city, on both islands, which were connected by one humongous suspension bridge, consisted mostly of glass and neon futurism. A portion of the larger one, however, was of classically styled Japanese architecture. Tsurabaya looked on at this district in admiration and surprise.

“The hanamachi,” Tsurabaya said, to no one in particular, “I didn’t think they’d be intact. I hope we can go there.”

“I hope so too,” Klein agreed, also admiring the architecture.

“Looks like Sakura has made some changes,” Harune said, pointing at another part of the city, which David was now skirting from a few miles out.

The building which Harune indicated was one which towered noticeably above all the others, on the end of a peninsula jutting out from one of the islands. This building was a silver and glass tower, narrow and culminating in a spike. At the top of the building proper, before the spike began, a holographic sign orbited the building.

“Arasaka Robotics: Why settle?” the sign read, showing that the company’s tagline had been changed.

“Subtle,” Tsurabaya said sarcastically.

“Alright ladies,” David said, “I’m heading for the port.”

“Trauma team is operational here,” Harune said, looking at his wrist computer.

David swung Prometheus back around the three islands, aiming for the island to the south of the ones containing the city, this one home to numerous ships. Once facing it, David began flying towards the spaceport, and when the ship was about a half mile out, suddenly stopped, not by choice apparently, as through the windows, one could see that Prometheus was suddenly wrapped in a faint white glow.

“Captain, I seem to be in a gravity suspension field. Should I push through?” Prometheus asked, sounding mildly alarmed.

“Stay calm,” Kyle chuckled, “it’s a security measure I’m sure.”

As if on cue, the usual announcement came on the intercom, telling all the ship’s occupants to be on the bridge, spaced apart, weapons unloaded and laid out in plain view, hands out of

pockets, identification within reach, ready to be boarded. Kyle gave the order, and Prometheus opened her shuttle bay door.

A few minutes later, Prometheus announced that a few single occupancy craft had landed in the shuttle bay, and that the occupants were making their way to the bridge. The security personnel, judging by their exceedingly perfect skin and glassy eyes, were synthetics, save for the one leading who was either organic or an AB model. All wore blue hazmat suits and carried large silver shotguns. One held up a scanner of some kind, likely scanning for pathogens, and the rest did the more usual search procedures, save the leader, who came onto the bridge, looking the Medusas up and down.

"Identifications and credit cards please," the lead security man said.

Everyone showed their identifications, credit cards, and whatever cash they had on hand, and meanwhile, another of the personnel began looking at the weapons, scanning their serial numbers and so on.

"The weapons are all licensed," the synthetic scanning them said at last.

"Any synthetics on board?" the lead security man asked.

"Just me," Kyle said cordially.

"Right," the security man said, taking from his belt a small camera with an attached ultraviolet light, "open your mouth."

"Buy a girl a drink first," Kovac quipped, earning her a glare from Kyle as he opened his mouth.

The security officer proceeded with the somewhat humiliating procedure of photographing Kyle's serial number on the roof of Kyle's mouth, then checking it on his Arasaka PAC.

"A contracted espionage model," the security officer said, "don't get many of those around here. There's some ground rules. Hold out your right arm please."

Kyle did so, and the security officer produced from his belt a device that looked like a black wristwatch, which he snapped onto Kyle's outstretched arm. The band sealed shut, a bit uncomfortably tight in Kyle's opinion.

"That's a tracker," the security officer explained, "everywhere you go it'll be scanned. If a business sees it and tells you to leave, you obey. As a synthetic, you do not have freedom of movement here."

"Just like the Savoy," Kyle said sarcastically.

"Do you intend to rebel, Tin Man?" the officer demanded.

"I wasn't aware that was an option," Kyle said with a patronizing smile.

"It's not," the officer said flatly, then backed away to the door of the bridge.

"Alright then," the lead security officer said at last, "you and your guns all check out. If you carry them, they must be unloaded in a sealed case, including knives. Your ship's cannons must be disabled, as must any on your shuttles. Welcome to New Kanazawa, enjoy your stay."

"Is the Yamatai Hotel still open?" Tsurabaya asked.

"It is, much bigger than it used to be too," the officer said, "you can't miss it. It's red."

With that, the security personnel left. David disabled Prometheus's cannons, and Prometheus closed her shuttle bay door, and a moment later, the force field covering the spaceport vanished just long enough for David to fly Prometheus past it, at which point it went up again instantly.

"What time is morning around here?" Max asked.

"Never," Tsurabaya said, "the planet is tidally locked. That's why the domes; without them, we'd all freeze to death."

David angled Prometheus down, landing among the various other ships at New Kanazawa Port. After a bit of discussion, it

was decided that the Medusas would use the shuttles for transportation. On unfamiliar ground, it was useful to have as much independence as possible. Thus, Harune was selected as the pilot, if only because he was the only of the available three who could read the signs.

The way to access the colony was very obvious; a massive geodesic tube, at least a mile and a half high, and equally wide, which came off the northernmost end of the spaceport island, heading for the western of the two islands which made up the proper city of New Kanazawa. The ride through the tunnel was painless enough, the exit was not, as quite suddenly, they were bathed all around in neon light.

"Get higher up," Kyle said, once his eyes had cleared being dazzled, "at least the traffic is thinner up there."

With a shrug, Harune tilted the shuttle upward, climbing up and up towards the top levels of the city. Kyle glanced back and saw Tsurabaya staring out of the window, a slight smile on his face.

"What are you thinking?" Kyle asked, taking a seat near Tsurabaya.

"I'm looking for where I was born," Tsurabaya said, "it looks like some of these buildings are built on the old foundations."

"We'll look for your house," Kyle promised.

"I'm wondering how anyone sleeps here with all this light," Joshie said; "It's like they're taking revenge on God for making the planet tidally locked."

"They probably have blackout curtains," Jack said, "notice how there's so many windows with no light coming out?"

Quite soon, Harune reached near the top of New Kanazawa. For several hundred feet, he had to drive through a massive hologram of a naked woman, who was very suggestively advertising a "bathhouse."

“Classy,” Buchner said sarcastically.

“Okay. Where am I going from here?” Harune asked upon reaching near the top of most of the buildings.

“I’m hungry,” Buchner piped up.

“Excellent idea. Harune, head for “I’m Hungry,” on Food Street.” Kyle said, and was greeted by chuckles and eye rolls all round.

“All seriousness,” Jack said, “we should stop off to eat somewhere. At least then we can get our bearings, and hopefully a map.”

“Whatever you say,” Harune shrugged.

Slowly, with the shuttle angled slightly so that it was possible to see down as well as forward, Harune flew along in the upper levels of New Kanazawa. Looking down closely at the buildings, it was plain to see how the city had been built. Rather than tearing down the old buildings to build the skyscrapers, the city’s builders had taken up the habit of building more on top of them, building up more and more in increasingly modern styles, from Art Deco at the bottom to glass and chrome futurism at the top. Jutting out from each “period” was a landing pad for the persons living or working in the buildings. The sidewalks so far below were at least the width of the landing pads, and then after it were wide streets, meaning that there was never less than 1/4 mile between buildings proper, in theory leaving plenty of room in which to fly one’s shuttle. The aforementioned tubes of black glass, which contained trains of some kind, often cut right through the buildings at various levels.

“Hell of a city,” Kyle said aloud at one point.

Fortunately for the initial goal, restaurants were abundant, and so Harune simply went for the one with the broadest appeal; an old dining car, placed atop a skyscraper, with the

remaining roof serving as a landing pad. The restaurant was called, appropriately enough, “The Dining Car.”

The Dining Car kept up its theme on the inside; the decor and furniture was all what one would expect of an American diner in the 1950s. The windows were covered in holographic screens of various iconic American scenes; Mount Rushmore, The Grand Canyon, Hollywood, Niagara Falls, etcetera. The food was classic diner fare, and in keeping with the theme, even the menu and service were all in English, even though the staff were all Japanese. The Medusas settled in at a booth and a table next to it, and ordered their food.

“This is absolutely incredible,” Tsurabaya, who sat in the booth, said. “Practically revolutionary!”

“The pancakes?” Franz asked.

“No dumbass. I mean all of..... this,” Tsurabaya said, waving vaguely with his fork at the restaurant; “An American restaurant in New Kanazawa. This would’ve been impossible five years ago, let alone 10.”

Everyone paused for a few seconds, reflecting on the truth of Tsurabaya’s words, then promptly forgot them and resumed eating.

The proprietress of The Dining Car was quite gracious and helpful, and blushed cutely when asking why the Medusas had made the long trip from Mars and Jack replied; “For the food.” She was then kind enough to send them all maps of New Kanazawa via their dial codes. She also showed them her watch, which kept New Kanazawa time. It turned out that the Medusas had arrived very early in the morning, and on a planet with no sun, a 48 hour system was considered optimal; 36 hours of waking time, 12 hours of sleep, but many businesses remained open round the clock.

“So, where did you grow up?” someone asked Tsurabaya as they left The Dining Car; “We’ve probably got a few hours before check in time at the hotels.”

“Oh,” Tsurabaya said, “I think it was to the east side of this island. Practically a shantytown.”

“We’ll go,” Kyle said cheerfully, looking down at the city below. “That’ll kill a few hours. Harune, think you can handle street level?”

“Sir yes Sir!” Harune saluted.

Everyone reentered the shuttle, Harune once again in the pilot’s seat. He took the descent slowly. It was in this descent that one saw that the lower down one went, the lower the class you belonged to. The buildings were plenty vast enough to show this. In the upper levels, one could look through the windows and see grand, ultramodern condominiums. In one, Kyle saw a maid cleaning a window, wearing the same black wristband on her right arm that was on him, showing that she was a synthetic.

Further down, the things in the windows became more diverse, advertising, in descending order, restaurants, tea shops, etcetera, then further down pawn shops and red windows indicating brothel apartments, then still lower, brothels disguised as “massage shops.” The bottom-most levels seemed to be empty altogether, save for street level, which was home to all manner of businesses.

At the street level, where Kyle actually saw a large amount of people, was where he most clearly saw the class divide, and it wasn’t purely monetary; no, the real divide here was based on organic and synthetic. One restaurant bore the charming sign; “No animals or synthetics allowed.”

All the synthetics which Kyle and the others saw were either attached to a human, sometimes literally, or they were prostitute models, judging by their perfect bodies and the fact they wore holographic bikinis, which left little to the imagination. Kyle, of course, made note of this, deciding he'd have to have one, even more so once he saw that they had holographic dial codes on their bikinis. He memorized the one on an attractive blonde, hoping she'd come to the Yamatai, or whatever hotel they'd settled at. A glance around showed most of the men doing the same at the sight of these prostitute models.

As Harune coasted along more eastward on the island, spurred on by Tsurabaya, the buildings began to shrink. They began to consist of clearly very old colonial buildings, including Shinto shrines, apparently genuine and active. Also in this area was the Yamatai hotel, a massive red pagoda.

"Here!" Tsurabaya exclaimed suddenly at one point, right at the edge of the island, at the bottom of the wall from which the island's force field emanated. "That parking lot!"

"You were born in a parking lot?" Kovac said.

"You dumb fuck," Kyle said, unable to restrain himself.

"I couldn't have put it better my self," Tsurabaya said, breaking into his infectious, big chested laugh; "No, the little settlement I was born in is now that parking lot. They've torn it down. Good. It was a shithole."

"I don't think this is much better," Harune observed, looking up and down the street, which was lined with ramshackle tenement houses of concrete and glass.

"Indeed," Tsurabaya said, "I can see why Auntie Fumiko was so determined to leave."

"Did you not revisit this spot the last time you came home?" Max asked.

"No. I was on a leash," Tsurabaya said.

By his micro-expressions, Kyle could see that this "leash" Tsurabaya referred to wasn't exactly metaphorical.

"Where next, Miss Daisy?" Harune asked cheerfully.

"We may as well head for a hotel," Jack said, switching to business mode. "Get settled, start our plan of attack."

"The Yamatai was the best in my day," Tsurabaya piped up.

"We can give it a try," Kyle decided, and Harune turned the shuttle to do just that.

The Yamatai Hotel was about as one might expect; a traditional Japanese wonderland, once one crossed the threshold. Past the door, there was a little alcove with places to put one's shoes, and then one stepped through to the tatami matted lobby.

"Welcome to The Yamatai, your world away from the real world. How may we help?" the young lady behind the reception desk, who wore a white kimono with an intricate multicolored pattern, asked.

"You have any rooms?" Harune asked, stepping forward with his credit card.

The young lady scanned Harune's card. Kyle saw that she had a black electronic wristband like his.

"You're a synthetic?" Kyle asked.

"All our staff are, Sir. We're run by a single artificial intelligence. We are the collective that makes up The Yamatai," the young woman explained, then turning to the group as a whole, continued; "Your credit is cleared, who prefers Japanese or western rooms?"

Everyone stated their preferences. Jack was quite concerned about cost, until the prices of the rooms were quoted, and they turned out to be shockingly cheap. From somewhere or other, a few male synthetics came, all of an identical model, cheaper than the receptionist, as these had visibly artificial skin and

eyes, and robotic voices. They offered to take the bags, which was refused; none wanted their weapons seen, as while they were secure, they were still loaded, illegal in New Kanazawa. After getting their shoes, they were at last shown upstairs.

Kyle, for his part, had chosen a western style room, which while it still had tatami mat floors, it also had a proper western style bed rather than a futon. Kyle didn't like sleeping on the floor; it felt like a vulnerable position if one's bedroom was attacked.

The synthetic who'd brought Kyle to his room explained a few things, regarding both the room and general etiquette, which Kyle was polite enough to listen to, despite his already knowing.

"Will Sir be requiring a companion of the night?" the synthetic asked, in that direct yet genteel Japanese way.

"I suppose so," Kyle chuckled, "when the night comes. How do I request one?"

"There's a catalog on the television, or I can note your preferences now and you can call the front desk and I'll send up your girl," the synthetic explained.

"That's alright," Kyle laughed, "I'll figure out the television. Thank you."

With a bow, the synthetic left, closing the door behind him. Kyle thus executed his usual procedure for hotel rooms of sweeping and securing it. All he found was three yukata robes and an equal number of pairs of slippers, for use in the hotel's public baths on the top floor, the room's bathrooms being considered merely a poor substitute, used by only those too prudish, at least that was what the room's vaguely passive aggressive pamphlet on the subject seemed to imply. His room secured, weapons in place, clothes unpacked, Kyle waited for the next stage, which began when his door was knocked on, by one

of the Medusas gathering him to regroup in one of the rooms, to plan the mission proper.

It was Max's room chosen, for whatever reason, and after the Medusas had found spots to settle down, the planning of the actual mission began. At this point, that initial feeling of unease had once again struck the group, now that their little flash of fun had passed.

"Alright," Jack said, flipping up the info on his wrist computer, "we have all the addresses of these places."

"Yes," Cheng said, "we have a problem."

Kyle: "And what is that?"

Cheng: "Tachibana said to look rich. I don't have anything rich."

Kyle: "And your best clothes aren't enough?"

"Men!" Kovac groaned.

Cheng: "She's right. No, my best clothes aren't enough. Nor are anyone else's. We need top of the line. Or at least high quality Serbian knockoffs."

Harune: "I can afford Serbian knockoffs I think. Let's ask the hotel."

Kyle: "In a minute. First is strategy. We're going to case these clubs. Whoever cases these clubs then cannot enter any of them in the operation proper. And also no one can go in to one club and then later go into another, we don't know who's watching these places or if they communicate. And we have to always go in pairs to do the op. No one goes alone."

Klein: "I'll do the casing. I'll take pictures and all that."

Jack: "Do you know how to take pictures?"

Klein: "A camera is a lens, just like a scope."

Kyle: "Fine by me. When do we start?"

Jack: "These places don't open for a long time. We may as well relax."

Tsurabaya: “I’m for the bath then. I haven’t been in a proper sento since Okinawa, 1941.”

Kyle: “I think I’ll join you.”

Max: “And I’m for the girls. Apparently the hotel has a catalogue.”

Jack: “Everyone enjoy yourselves however you want. You’ve got 12 hours. Don’t leave the hotel without telling me or Daedalus.”

With that, Kyle and Tsurabaya headed for their rooms to slip into their yukatas, then went for the elevator. As they stood waiting for it, Harune and Kovac came running up behind them, having decided that they also wanted to enjoy the baths. The elevator went up to the top floor of the Yamatai, which was about 30 stories. Not very big, by New Kanazawa standards, but set apart from the density of skyscrapers enough that the view looked good.

The men went into their bath, and Kovac into the women’s bath of course, and then proceeded through the usual procedure of washing their bodies before entering the baths, in the order recommended by the sign in the changing room.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Kyle sighed appreciatively as he settled into the bath. “This is the way to go.”

Harune and Tsurabaya chuckled, then settled into an appreciative silence, looking at the city outside. They were the sento’s only occupants.

“Is it good to be home?” Harune asked.

“Yes,” Tsurabaya said with a smile, “I do believe it is.”

“We’re gonna be here a few days I think,” Kyle said, “savor it while you can.”

Kyle still couldn’t shake the underlying creep of unease he felt as he looked out the window at the undulating technicolor dalliance of New Kanazawa, and a glance at Harune showed that

it was slightly more than an underlying creep where he was concerned. Tsurabaya, for his part, had simply fallen asleep and was snoring.

Everyone was brought out of their reveries by a group of boisterous young men coming in, talking rather loudly in some obscure colonial Japanese dialect, and so out of courtesy, Kyle, Harune, and Tsurabaya moved to the sauna for a few minutes, as per medicinal regulation, then left, to head back to their rooms.

"I need a woman," Tsurabaya laughed in the hallway outside the rooms, "I hope Max didn't take all the good ones from the catalog."

Kyle had much the same idea, and so turned on his room's television. He found the catalog and ordered a blonde synthetic, who arrived at his door just a few minutes later. As so often in these situations, Kyle answered the door stark naked, and the business was over in a pleasurable amount of time, leaving Kyle in his room alone and satisfied, his mind cleared for the mission at hand, though as there were some hours left, and having nothing better to do, he turned on the television, eventually watching some film or other that mildly held his interest for the next few hours. It all ended with, of course, yet another knock at the door, announcing a regrouping.

"Right," Jack said, once all had gathered, "I spoke to the hotel. It was quite aghast at my taste, but it told me where to go. There's an emporium of Serbian knockoff clothes across the big bridge. Even gave me an address. It should still be open now. Orpheus, I want you dressed rough to scout the clubs. Look like you belong."

"If I may Sir," Harune cut in, "he's a bit of a gaijin."

Jack: "Well Icarus; who do you think should do the scouting?"

"Me," Harune said flatly.

A pause.

Harune: “What are you all staring at?”

Kyle: “Well Icarus. It’s just you’re not the most intimidating person here. But you raise a point. We could send in-“

Jack: “No. It’s a good idea. Alright Icarus, you’re the scout.”

Harune: “Thank you. Achilles, did you bring one of your leather jackets?”

“I did,” Joshie chuckled, “let’s make you look the part.”

“Go on ahead. Us adults will finish the planning,” Kyle said with a dismissive hand wave. And Harune and Joshie left.

“Right,” Tsurabaya said, “let’s make a map of these clubs. I think all but one are on the east island.”

The addresses of the clubs were looked at, and Tsurabaya was proven correct. It was decided that the club on the West Island would be cased last. There were seven clubs in total, which meant that some repeats of which Medusas entered posing as clients was inevitable. But they’d manage.

A few minutes later, Harune and Joshie returned. Harune looked as he never had before; rough and actually fairly intimidating, in Joshie’s leather jacket, which looked quite loose on Harune’s wiry frame, as if hiding weapons. This was paired with black pants, in which Harune had slashed a few holes, black combat boots, and round sunglasses.

“How do I look?” Harune asked.

“Like you belong in a yakuza club,” Kyle laughed.

“Who gets to go to the clothing shop?” Cheng asked excitedly.

“Everyone,” Jack said briskly, standing from the bed, “grab your gear.”

Everyone split off to their rooms, gathering their weapons and then regrouping in the hall outside the rooms, then at last heading out and to the shuttle. They then headed for the gigantic suspension bridge which connected the islands. This

bridge, it turned out, was accessed via a gigantic tunnel, much like the one which connected the spaceport, but unlike that tunnel, the bridge access point had several force fields of the variety which could be driven through, but which held in heat and air. A necessity, as the bridge was uncovered.

"So what was this place like in your day anyway?" someone asked Tsurabaya on the ride.

"Completely different," Tsurabaya said, "I don't recognize it. We didn't have skyscrapers back then. Didn't have synthetics either, for that matter. We had water powered automatons that built things. That's all."

"Sounds like an H.G. Wells novel," Joshie said, seeming to not note the irony.

The crew reached the place they were aiming for, a humongous white spherical building called, appropriately enough, "The Pearl." On the inside, it was a seemingly endless bazaar style shopping mall, selling truly everything imaginable. The staff were all downmarket model synthetics, with plastic looking skin and often exposed joints. At one point someone asked who owned them. The answer was intriguing; the synthetics were apparently all being "driven" by the consciousness of their owners, who were mostly Serbs as expected, "casting" their souls in remotely. The reasons were twofold; they stopped the owner's organic bodies from sustaining any damage from a rowdy customer, and even more so, it made commerce easier, as the synthetics all had language chips and no accents, as one's accent doesn't carry when one's consciousness moves bodies.

In any event, the Medusas all walked out with a knockoff fancy outfit, tailor made in minutes by "appearance printers," pods in which one would stand and have one's measurements taken, and with fabric, buttons, thread, etcetera inserted into a compartment at the bottom of the pod, it would print out an

outfit to the specifications of the user. The Medusas also purchased a small camera, for Harune to use when casing the clubs, and all each got a pair of the yellow tinted glasses worn by most residents, to block being constantly dazzled by all the neon and holographic LED. Harune bought himself a record by a singing pair called The Hayashi Sisters, for his own amusement.

From here, the Medusas went to each of the clubs. Under Jack's instruction, Harune drove above street level, where there were likely to be fewer cameras, and when they'd located a club, he would park a block or more away and then head up the street on foot in order to enter. After some deliberation, it was decided he wouldn't wear a wire. If it was discovered or spotted, he'd be in trouble, as he would be for the camera for that matter, but it was universally decided that one risk was more than enough.

Harune accomplished his task quite well, stepping into each of the seven clubs and photographing all that was needed; all ways in and out, including air ducts, both bathrooms, any exposed circuit breakers, all blindspots such as corner booths and behind the bar, and a few snaps of the general clientele and all visible staff. No one paid Harune the slightest attention, except a hooker or two, whom he easily rebuffed, though he never did say how.

The casing of the joints took a mere two nights, so efficient was Harune. He seemed to be truly back on his game after whatever shock he'd gone through. During the two days, when the scouting wasn't happening, and during the few which followed, the Medusas had something of a little vacation.

Tsurabaya spent much time looking for the places he remembered. He found few. What he did find was a library of genealogy, where one would give a DNA sample to the librarian, such as a strand of hair, and the librarian would then insert the

sample into a slot in her desk, then transfer a file on all available, or at least all non-classified, information on the person's past dealings in New Kanazawa. It didn't tell Tsurabaya much, beyond that he'd been born here a very long time ago, and that his birthday corresponded to some time in April of 1890, as he'd thought, and had left for reasons not on official record at the age of seven, again as he thought.

Kyle had fun on the vacation in his usual way, sampling the prostitute models on offer at the Yamatai. Tempting though it was, he refrained from heading to any proper brothel. He made sure to tip his ladies generously, recognizing that they didn't have the easiest living in this place.

After the various clubs had been cased, and the photographs Harune had taken been examined with all strategies decided on, the proper operation began; pairs of Medusas, dressed in their "rich" outfits, headed into the clubs.

Once inside, the pairs were inevitably approached by black marketeers, and when they said they wanted implants, those who approached them would direct them to who to approach in the bar. They would then ask to see the implants, and when they were shown them and they proved to be Arasaka implants, the Medusas doing the operation would leave, commending the black marketeers for buying local products in accordance with the law, and forbidding them to speak of the visit on pain of death.

Only three such visits were made, one per night, before the goal was reached. One of these, for which Kyle wasn't present, has been remembered by someone other than myself, and that is Buchner and Cheng's visit to one club, which was a black and gold Art Deco jazz bar. Buchner wore white, and Cheng wore a bright green sparkly dress, and the enormous round yellow-tinted neon blocking glasses she'd bought.

How everything in the Art Deco club went down is likely lost to history, save that it wasn't the club where the goal of the mission began to be reached. That happened in the club where straws were drawn and it came up Kyle and Tsurabaya were to be the ones entering the club. Thus, they put on their knockoff suits, in which they were only able to conceal folding knives, and set off into the club.

Kyle always felt somehow out of place in a suit, especially a fitted one, even if it was a Serbian knockoff. In this club, called The Jukebox, reached by multicolored lit steps to the second floor of a converted house skyscraper, suits were especially inappropriate, as the club was practically the definition of a "dive bar." The clientele was an eclectic group of men and women, wearing wild clothing and with even more wild hair. The music was an odd yet somehow coherent style mixing traditional Japanese music with something like synthpop. The tables were round and painted to look like records.

In spite of the eclectic clientele, The Jukebox wasn't exactly synthetic friendly. It bore the same sign as many places in New Kanazawa; "No animals or unaccompanied synthetics allowed." In spite of this rule, by the door sat a group of synthetics who one could immediately see were yakuza enforcers by the way they dressed; all were men, and all shirtless, their upper bodies covered in tattoos, including their serial numbers which glowed in various colors on their chests. Their serial numbers all bore the prefix "AG," and they were clearly of the more animated model lines, given their boisterous chatter and enthusiastic drinking and smoking.

"I'll stay by you," Kyle telepathically advised Tsurabaya as they entered the club, "act like your faithful little toaster. While in here, you own me. Don't call me Sir, whatever you do."

Tsurabaya winked in response, then to fit the cover, took Kyle by the arm, leading him along as people here usually did to their synthetics, up to the bar, where he ordered a drink for himself only. Kyle stayed on guard mode, looking around and using his other heightened senses. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman, herself rather overdressed for the setting, in business attire, spotting him and Tsurabaya, getting up from her table, and approaching.

"Don't look up, but I think the eagle has landed," Kyle said telepathically, and so Tsurabaya put on a perfect performance of being surprised when the woman reached him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I'm Yuki," the woman said cordially, "that looks like an expensive drink for this place. Mr?"

"Fukunaga," Tsurabaya said, bowing slightly and extending his hand.

Yuki: "Pleased to meet you Mr. Fukunaga. And who's your big metal friend?"

Tsurabaya glanced over his shoulder where Yuki pointed, acting as if he just remembered Kyle existed.

Tsurabaya: "Oh, that's the guard unit my father insisted I buy for when I go out. Not that I need him."

Tsurabaya turned to Kyle.

Tsurabaya: "Don't stand there. Go do your thing somewhere else."

Kyle: "I'm sorry Sir. I-"

Tsurabaya: "Have your ear speakers gotten fried Tin Man? Fuck off! That's an order."

"Yes Sir," Kyle said, looking emotionless and unaffected as he turned to saunter down the bar.

The bar, fortunately, had a single long mirror running the back of it. Less fortunately, Yuki turned from it, and Tsurabaya

did the same, no doubt for the very reason Kyle had been glad the mirror was present; he, or anyone else present, could've read their lips. But Tsurabaya knew what he was doing, and so Kyle contented himself with ordering a drink and sitting at the bar, pretending not to notice as, eventually, Yuki left and Tsurabaya stood and walked up behind him.

Tsurabaya fairly punched Kyle in the back and spun his barstool around, then knocked Kyle's drink to the floor.

"Hey!" Tsurabaya barked, "Did I say you could have a drink? No! Do you have any money to pay for it? No! It's a good thing the nice lady paid for us both. I could have you terminated where you stand, but I don't want to make any more of a spectacle than you've already made for us both! Come on!"

With that, Tsurabaya roughly grabbed Kyle's arm, and began leading Kyle out, Kyle acting the part of the meek slave who dare not show how humiliated he was. The men kept this up until they were halfway back up the block from The Jukebox, when Tsurabaya released Kyle, and the two men simply stood laughing for a minute.

"Is she our gal?" Kyle asked at last, once they'd started walking again.

"I think so," Tsurabaya said optimistically, "she wouldn't show me the implants in front of prying eyes. She gave me a card with an address in the old city pleasure district, some bordello she runs. Real, live girls apparently, who I'll be meeting tomorrow."

"And synthetic women aren't "real, live" girls to you?" Kyle asked.

"Kyle, I didn't mean that, I-" Tsurabaya began.

"I know how you meant it," Kyle said with a smile; "Now, let's get over and case this last joint. Hopefully last anyway."

Kyle and Tsurabaya climbed back into the shuttle, where the others were waiting of course. Everyone mockingly clapped at Kyle and Tsurabaya's seeming success, and Harune took off for the old city, which took up the northern half of the eastern inhabited island in New Kanazawa.

The old city was quite something, and as it turned out, and well lived up to its name. Here, neon and holographics were nonexistent, and even electric lights seemed few and far between, and all the buildings and streets were done in the old style, such that a glance upward at the sight of the island's force field covering, as well as the flying vehicles, were the only ways one could tell one hadn't somehow stepped into medieval Japan.

The pleasure district was quite easy to find; in it, on every street corner and under every tree, stood beautiful kimono-clad women under classical style Japanese umbrellas, and men, often in equally old fashioned dress, strolled or bicycled around seeking their services. When a man had selected a girl, she would lead him to one of the traditional houses, which in this district were all kept totally private by their high fences and gates behind curtains. This was the sort of womanizing which Kyle instinctively knew he'd never be able to afford, and so didn't even bother being aroused.

The house which the Medusas sought was the whimsically named "Wind in the Willows," which was easy enough to find, as the gates had plaques next to them, plus the house indeed had, rising from behind the fence, an enormous willow tree. Harune lifted the shuttle above the house and aimed down at it, and Kyle moved to the front.

"Prometheus, do an X-ray scan of the house," Kyle said.

"Yes, Captain," Prometheus said, and proceeded with the scan, uploading the results into Kyle's head.

“Entirely innocent,” Kyle said after a moment.

“Oh?” someone asked in surprise.

“Yes,” Kyle said, equally puzzled, “there’s a couple of swords mounted in the entryway like usual. Knives in the kitchen. It’s a mostly weapon free house, and judging by what’s going on in the upstairs bedroom, it serves the purpose the woman in the bar said it does. She must keep her illicit goods off site somewhere.”

A general chuckle went up at Kyle’s mention of “what was going on in the bedroom,” and then all turned back to business.

Tsurabaya: “Alright. So I go in alone?”

Jack: “Oh no you don’t! The deal is, myself, Icarus, Daedalus, and Heracles drop you off a ways away. You come on foot, we catch up in the shuttle and wait in front of the house. If anything goes wrong, we come in.”

Tsurabaya: “And if all goes right?”

Kyle: “Kill Yuki, get the illicit implants, meet us on the street, and we leave.”

Tsurabaya: “Yes Sir.”

With that, Harune started back toward the main city. Somewhere along the way, the group saw a number of persons riding on hovering motorbikes. Kyle and Jack conversed about them slightly, and when they passed a business advertising them for rent, they had Harune pull over. The old man who owned the rental office had been just about to close, but he was quite helpful, in that very gracious and faintly passive-aggressive Japanese way, and promised that the five hoverbikes would be delivered to the Yamatai in the morning.

This delivery promise proved true. Kyle and Jack had chosen these hoverbikes on the spur of the moment for several reasons, chief among them being that they were less conspicuous than the shuttle, which was of a design not terribly common here,

and even more usefully, it allowed them to stagger their takeoff times and vary their routes, all autonomously, towards the destination. It seemed such fun that Kovac asked to come along, and so she did, on the back of Harune's motorcycle. The Steinels in particular seemed jealous to miss out, but they didn't invite themselves.

It was certainly thrilling, Kyle thought, whipping through the neon brights of New Kanazawa on a hoverbike, anonymous in this city of endless night. It was with this exhilarated feeling that he reentered the old world charm of the old city and the pleasure district, himself and the others on their hoverbikes converging on the corner of the street on which The Wind in the Willows was situated, just in time to see Tsurabaya be beckoned through the gate by a kimono clad woman, presumably the house's courtesan.

Taking precaution, Kyle and the others got off their hoverbikes at the end of the street and approached the front.

"Daedalus? I don't feel good about this," Harune said. He used Kyle's callsign as per regulation while on an op, but he was addressing his father.

If listening to Harune's words, or to the feelings of unease which everyone in the little group of Kyle, Jack, Max, Harune, and Kovac later confessed to feeling could have prevented what followed, we shall never know.

For a few minutes, all seemed to be quite normal. Wind in the Willows was totally quiet, and the streets around were too, save for the soft flirtations and giggles of those engaged in the pleasure district's trade, and the occasional buzz of a vehicle. In retrospect, it was too quiet. Tsurabaya should have been sending out telepathic updates.

It began with a flash. A bright blue flash from the second story of Wind in the Willows's house. A portal, Kyle realized,

and before he or any of the others could process or respond to this, there were shouts, and immediately after, flashes of gunfire. Plasma shells tore through the house's thin walls, some coming down on the street, others tearing through other houses in all directions. Screams began all through the district.

"Charge! Fucking charge!" Jack barked, which of course was unnecessary.

Kyle and Jack charged Wind in the Willows's cedar gate, which shattered practically to powder. In formation then, Kyle, Jack, Max, Harune, and Kovac moved through the garden very quickly, their guns drawn. Someone decimated the massive willow tree with their gun, as a precaution in case any might be hiding behind it. They then burst into the traditional house, the stairs directly in front, a hallway forward and another to the left also just past the front door. By this point the commotion, at least from where it had began, had stopped.

"Medea, with me," Kyle said, stepping onto the stairs. Kovac obeyed, moving to cover his back.

"Rest of us clear the downstairs," Jack nodded.

"Perseus!" Kyle called up the stairs. "If you're not already, lay down on the ground."

With that, Kyle and Kovac fully emerged into the upstairs hallway and began moving along it, shooting doors. In the hallway, hanging halfway out of one of the open doorways, was the body of a young woman clutching a gun, herself riddled with bullet holes that ruined her handmade kimono which must have cost tens of millions of NeoYen. From the room she hung out of came a low, pained, masculine groan. Tsurabaya's voice.

"Oh fuck," Kyle said, somehow sensing what was wrong as he broke formation and sprinted to rip off the sliding screen door to the room.

“Harune! Call the trauma team now!” Kyle screamed at what he saw.

“Yes Sir!” Harune shouted back.

In a back corner of the room, lying with his head and shoulders propped up on one wall, was Tsurabaya. He lay practically eviscerated and exsanguinated from what must have been hundreds of blade cuts and stabs to his legs, right arm, but most of all his abdomen. His eyes, halfway open and rolling languidly, and an ever slowing little geyser of blood from his right arm were the only indication he was still alive. With abandon, Kyle bolted and knelt in front of him. He reached around to try and pick Tsurabaya up, then thought better of it, but didn’t pull his arm away, so he still cradled his old friend. Somehow, he felt what was coming as Tsurabaya’s eyes shot open at Kyle’s touch.

“Oh… Kyle,” Tsurabaya wheezed.

“The trauma team is on their way!” Harune shouted from downstairs.

“My left hand,” Tsurabaya choked, “There’s evidence. We got the bitch. And the synthetic who got me; AG-0486.”

“Good,” Kyle said with a smile, “you don’t need to speak.”

But Tsurabaya wasn’t listening. He had things he needed to say.

“My back pocket,” Tsurabaya gasped, “something for everyone.”

“Alright,” Kyle said, not understanding.

“And Auntie Fu.. Fumik… Fumiko,” Tsurabaya choked, causing him to cough up another little geyser of blood.

“I’ll call her,” Kyle promised, as Tsurabaya turned his head to face forward.

Kyle felt Tsurabaya’s last remaining muscles slacken, and he looked up at his old friend’s face.

“Father?” Tsurabaya asked in amazement.

Kyle almost said something, but Tsurabaya wasn't talking to Kyle. No, a smile was on his face, and his eyes had that far off, glassy glow which means one is already past the veil.

"It's so beautiful," Tsurabaya said, speaking easily now, "I'll see you here soon… my… friend."

"Oh gods," Kyle half whispered, "no. Please no."

Tears pouring down his face as they never had before, Kyle took the contents out of Tsurabaya's left hand and back left pocket, not taking the time to notice what they were as he slid them into his own pocket. Kovac slowly, gingerly approached.

"Sh… shut his eyes," Kyle stammered through the tears, and Kovac wordlessly knelt to do so.

Kyle halfway heard heavy booted footsteps coming up the stairs, and so cradling his friend's body, he stood. It was Max who appeared in the doorway.

"Okay," Max said briskly, "the trauma team is out front and- oh no. Dad?"

Kyle simply nodded, and Max rushed to his side to mourn.

Just a moment later, more footsteps and the voices of the trauma team's paramedics coming up the stairs was heard, and then the trauma team arrived, led by Harune, the team itself being three paramedics dressed in all black, bringing along with them a long hovering stretcher with a flipped open glass cover.

"Who is the patient?" one paramedic asked.

"WHO DOES IT FUCKING LOOK LIKE?!" Max exploded.

"Point taken," the paramedic said, taking the body from Kyle and laying it in the bed.

"You're too late," Kyle said, numbness setting in.

"Maybe not, depending on how much of himself was stored in his chips," one paramedic said, lowering the glass lid of the stretcher, around the edge of which appeared a glowing blue

seal; “We’re taking him to the Nishimura Hospital. We have one seat in the ambulance.”

“I’m coming,” Kyle said, knowing it was too late already.

“I’m sorry,” the paramedic said, seeing Kyle’s armband, “we can’t allow unaccompanied synthetics on board the ambulance. Local law.”

“Are you fucking-“ Kyle began.

“I’ll go,” Kovac cut in, stepping around Kyle, “I’ll call the others on the way. You guys hurry over.”

The lead paramedic rattled off the hospital’s address, and then Kovac and the paramedics left, leaving Kyle and sons, plus Jack, standing alone in the upstairs of Wind in the Willows.

“Dad, do you think they can-“ Max began.

“I don’t think so,” Kyle said. “He doesn’t want to be back. Let’s get to that hospital.”

And so Kyle, Jack, Max, and Harune returned to their hover-bikes and sped off to the hospital, fed directions via the neural interface on their wrist computers, so that they arrived at the Nishimura Hospital in less than 15 minutes. The hospital was just back inside the edge of the neon jungle, in a gigantic silver tower. The inside looked not much different from an advanced hospital on Earth, not that any of the four were taking much notice as they burst in through the front door, Kyle covered in blood. A nurse rushed from behind the triage desk.

“Do you need help, Sir?” the nurse asked.

“No!” Kyle snapped, then gained control of himself and said; “Sorry, I’m here for a friend, his name is Yoshiro Tsurabaya, brought in for a possible revival.”

A possible revival, Kyle thought, what a fucking term.

Harune stepped forward, showing his card, which the nurse tapped against her glass pad and nodded.

“Alright,” the nurse said, “we’ll let you know of any developments. Sir, there’s a men’s room around the corner there if you’d like to wash yourself off.”

Kyle simply shrugged and walked past the various huddled masses of the waiting room, around the corner to a long hallway leading somewhere deeper into the hospital, and into the men’s room which opened from it. Feeling somehow slightly guilty to do it, he went forward washing the blood off his hands, arms, face, neck, and wrist computer. His clothing would likely have to be burned. Max entered behind him a few seconds later, to do much the same procedure.

“It’s not your fault, Dad,” Max said. The only words either of them spoke in the bathroom.

Kyle and Max exited, finding their way back to the lobby, where Kovac stood waiting. Out of one of the windows, Harune and Jack could be seen on their wrist computers. Kovac walked up Kyle and Max.

“The others are on their way and-“ Kovac began.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Kyle snapped, “how is it looking?”

“Not good,” Kovac said, “not good at all.”

With this final confirmation of what he’d already known, Kyle sank into one of the seats in the hospital’s waiting room. A few minutes later, Jack and Harune came back inside and joined them.

“Auntie Fumiko says she wants to hold his funeral at his home. I said that was The Eagle’s Claw,” Harune said.

“My father said… actually he didn’t say much,” Jack added.

“The mission is done at least,” Kyle muttered, “so we can go home. But I’m thinking we don’t file a report yet.”

A pause, and then a few nods. The others may have been simply thinking Kyle was going to give them a day or so of mourning before they returned to business, but he wasn’t; Kyle

was thinking already of revenge against the mysterious "Yuki," not to mention an investigation into why she'd had him killed to begin with.

Soon enough, the other Medusas arrived, and the news was passed around. Hofnitz halfheartedly tried to give a few scientifically based reassurances, but everyone knew the reality. They just knew.

"He's in heaven now," Joshie said at one point.

"Shut the fuck up!" Harune growled, getting to his feet.

"Harune, don't," Kyle said, "you've other places for your anger."

And for the first time, Harune sat and allowed a few tears out. He didn't fully cry; he was too proud and too Japanese to do so in public, but it was progress.

Eventually, a young nurse came, asking for friends of Yoshiro Tsurabaya, inviting them up to the office of the chief of surgery, Dr. Uehara, to learn of Tsurabaya's condition.

"Why not just tell us now yourself?" Hofnitz demanded.

"Because I don't know," the nurse said simply.

The ride was quite long, rising up over 100 stories, and to Kyle felt like the longest elevator ride of his life, right until it at last ended at a long hallway of large offices. The nurse let the Medusas into Dr. Uehara's office, which was one of the largest, with one entire wall being a large window. Dr. Uehara himself stood behind a large desk whose top was a touchscreen console. The nurse closed the door, leaving the Medusas alone with Dr. Ueahara, a fairly short man with synthetic gold eyes.

Dr. Ueahra: "I'm sorry to say, we could not save your friend. Now, we have his genetic code of course, but his brain tissue was damaged and his chips corrupted such that any clone we made would be just a visual facsimile."

Kyle: "And his Soul Byte?"

Dr. Uehara: “He had none. His credit level was not good enough for that. Now, I have paying patients to attend to. Mr. Tsurabaya’s body will be tended to by the proper authorities. If you’ll excuse me.”

Something snapped in Kyle, and he felt it snap in the other Medusas as well.

Kyle: “Do you have a Soul Byte, Dr. Uehara?”

Dr. Uehara: “Yes I do. Why?”

Kyle stepped forward and grabbed Dr. Ueahara’s throat with one hand and picked him up, as easily as if Dr. Uehara was made of tissue paper.

“You know, Doctor,” Kyle said, “I’ve always hated labcoats. You see how strong I am?”

Choking, Dr. Uehara half nodded.

“Yes,” Kyle said, “well I’m not sure I’m even the strongest one here. You know how easily I could throw you out that window? Better question; you know why I don’t?”

Dr. Uehara shook his head.

“Because it would be too quick,” Max said from behind Kyle.

With that, Kyle reached up with his other hand and, with just the thumb, crushed Dr. Uehara’s windpipe, then threw him to the ground in disgust. Jack came forward and delivered a stomp to one of the Dr’s legs, ensuring he wouldn’t get up again. In this state the Medusas left Dr. Uehara’s office, and out onto the street outside the hospital.

“Back to the hotel?” someone asked.

“I suppose so,” Jack said, “then back to Mars in the morning. We have a lot left ahead of us.”

Everyone piled into the shuttle. None much spoke on the return to the Yamatai, not until they’d regrouped in one of their rooms to plan their next steps.

“What was that of his you put in your pocket?” Kovac asked.

Kyle showed the two objects. One was an implant, presumably Daishono Industries in origin, the "evidence" Tsurabaya had mentioned. The other was what appeared to be a vial of blood, of some unbreakable glass, with a pair of metal prongs. A key to a biometric lock, everyone concluded after a moment. On a hunch, someone switched on the UV light on their wrist computer, and saw that sure enough, embossed on the glass of the vial was the logo of First United Bank of Cydonia, and the words; "Safe Deposit Key 86."

"He said it was something for everyone," Kyle said.

"David," Jack said after a pause, "could you fly tonight? That's a question, not an order."

"Yes," David said, "Odin knows I'll not get any sleep for days. Gods, I really did think that beautiful bastard would live forever."

That got at least a chuckle from everyone, who all began heading for their rooms to shower and change. Only at this point did Kyle look down and notice how soaked in blood his clothes were. He wondered that the hotel's AI hadn't sent for the police.

"Father," Harune said as Kyle was stepping into his room, "I have an errand. Can you all wait an hour?"

"Of course," Kyle said, "but where are you going? Would you like me to come after I change clothes?"

"I'd like to go to the temple across the road and leave an offering on Uncle Yoshiro's behalf," Harune said, "and I'd rather go alone if that's alright."

"Go right ahead," Kyle said with an approving smile, then stepped into his room.

Fighting back tears, Kyle slipped out of the blood soaked clothes, and wrapped them in a plastic bag. He had nowhere to

dispose of them, and he wouldn't leave them behind to potentially be found and sold on the black market to make clones, or worse. Kyle then took a shower, and packed up, ready to say goodbye to New Kanazawa, though if all went to plan, he'd surely be back. He met most of the others in the lobby, and Harune rejoined them soon. They all piled into the shuttle, and flew back to the spaceport, then boarded Prometheus for the flight back to Mars. Kyle, of course, had to go to the core room to tell Prometheus the news.

The Medusas made good time back to Mars, David setting down at Cydonia Spaceport so that the key could be pursued. They found their way to First United Bank of Cydonia quite easily, though it had been years since their last visit. The procedure was simple; all the Medusas had to do was show the key, at which point the teller asked for identification, and confirmed that all the Medusas were on the approved list to open the safe deposit box.

"Herr Tsurabaya said you'd all be by if anything happened to him," the teller, a red haired young lady, remarked; "I'm sorry for your loss."

"You knew him?" Jack asked.

"All the girls here did," the teller said with a blush and a giggle, "he had to come in every couple of months. We require in person payments for DNA lockboxes, as they're so expensive we're often losing money just to have them."

So that's why he only had a girl once a week, Kyle realized. He was spending so much of his salary on a safe deposit box.

The teller led the Medusas into the bank's mammoth vault, and through the labyrinth of smaller vaults until she reached a safety deposit room with an obsidian table, the walls lined with safety deposit boxes, then using the key, unlocked box 86.

“Take all the time you want,” the teller said with a smile, “there’s a powder room behind the door at that far end. When you’re ready to leave, or if you have any questions, simply hit the buzzer by the door we came in from.”

“Thank you, fraulein,” Kyle said, and the teller left.

With a gulp, Jack stepped forward and opened the vault. Inside there was nothing outwardly remarkable. Just two oversized Manila envelopes, one labeled “photographs,” the other labeled “letters to whoever is left.”

The letters envelope was opened first. In it, the Medusas found letters addressed not only to each of them, but also to many names they didn’t recognize, and a number to names that a few of them did know, recognizing them as belonging to persons from Project Phoenix, such as the Fosters and Jimmy, and one to Auntie Fumiko. None wanted to open their envelopes in this impersonal place, and Kyle tucked his away, determined not to open his until he’d gotten vengeance. The photographs likewise they decided to save looking at for later and give as many as possible to Auntie Fumiko, except those of a classified nature, or those which they couldn’t bear to part with.

Back at The Eagle’s Claw, everyone slowly unpacked, and Kyle offered to head to The Glass Hub and give Camille her letter, and tell the staff the shocking news, which they took appropriately to heart. Max stayed up the full night writing out sheet music for the funeral, and most everyone else got drunk. A date for a week along was decided for the funeral, with The Glass Hub as a location.

“You think it’s appropriate? His funeral being in a hooker bar?” Joshie asked doubtfully.

“It’s what he’d want, no?” Max said with an impish grin. This gave everyone the good laugh they’d needed.

David and Jack went on the third day after the death to Camp Hero, then Fort Worden, to see that the news was spread in time for attendance, along with letters to those who could be found. Kyle and the others waited at The Eagle's Claw for Auntie Fumiko, who brought her own transport.

The funeral was quite small; no more than 40 attended. Tsurabaya's body wasn't released, but the Medusas did build a cairn in his honor by the lake. At the funeral, they saw a few faces they hadn't in a long time, such as Norma Jean Pearce and the Fosters. Kyle caught hostile looks between, of all people, Brian Foster and Iridia Cheng, which he didn't ask an explanation for.

The musical program included the song "Kawa no nagare no you ni," sung by Misora Hibari. This is a beautiful song that I'll not be recounting, as it's easily findable and wasn't the highlight of the musical program.

Jack gave a beautiful trilingual eulogy, talking of Tsurabaya's humor, his roguish nature, and his assistance to the children of Camp Hero, the latter part rather obliquely so as to not break any laws of classification. When Jack had finished, Max came to the stage, guitar in hand.

Max: "I'm grateful to you all for attending, and seeing so many of my old friend's favorite people. If you all would, please look at the sheet music I've distributed to you all. This is a song he taught me a lifetime ago, when I was a young, lost boy. If you feel at all able, please sing along."

The song was the following.

Edelweiss, Edelweiss,
Every morning you greet me.
Small and white,
Clean and bright,

You look happy to meet me.

Blossom of snow,
May you bloom and grow,
Bloom and grow forever.
Edelweiss, Edelweiss,
Bless my homeland forever.

Blossom of snow,
May you bloom and grow,
Bloom and grow forever.
Edelweiss, Edelweiss,
Bless my homeland forever!

It was a beautiful funeral, but still, to Kyle's mind, not as beautiful as revenge.

As it turned out, Tsurabaya's body never did get released, nor his ashes. Kyle never found his friend's grave. However I myself did a few months ago, at time of writing. For reasons unknown, Tsurabaya was buried on Emmermann's Valhalla estate, with a beautiful marble gravestone by a stream, in a bed of red and white chrysanthemums. His grave reads the following, in three languages:

YOSHIRO
TSURABAYA
(1890-1997)

SKETCH THE TREES AND THE
DAFFODILS, IN COLORS ON THE
SNOWY LINEN LAND

Author's Note. A monumental chapter, both in the narrative and in Kyle's life. The whereabouts of Tsurabaya's grave and the fact that his body was never released are likely to give the reader over to speculation. I can only say that there's no theory that the reader may have which I and Tsurabaya's loved ones are unlikely to have had already, and all I can say is that I can't speak to the possible truth of any of them.

Chapter 18

After Tsurabaya's funeral, the offer was extended to Auntie Fumiko to stay another night and look through her nephew's photographs. She accepted, and also unveiled a gift she'd brought; a very well aged bottle of plum wine. But before the looking through of the photograph's could begin, Kyle decided to test an idea.

"Auntie Fumiko," Kyle said at one point, "walk with me, please? Out by the lake."

"Of course," Auntie Fumiko said with an inquisitive smile, and stepped out with Kyle.

"What is it Kyle?" Auntie Fumiko asked after she and Kyle had walked from the house a distance. "Looking for moral support?"

"Bit more than that I think," Kyle said, "I was thinking; what if we didn't just move on from your nephew's death? What if we made it mean something?"

"You mean justice?" Auntie Fumiko asked.

"I was thinking more like revenge," Kyle said bluntly.

"I like the sound of that," Auntie Fumiko said, then reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"My husband ruined me," Auntie Fumiko chuckled, "I can't seem to give these things up. You have a light?"

"An old friend taught me to always have a light on hand for a lady," Kyle said with a smile, producing his lighter and waving away the cigarette offered.

"Alright," Auntie Fumiko said after a long slow puff, "how can I help?"

Kyle: “Before I start, I think it should be made clear that there’s things I can’t tell. I can’t tell you what your nephew did for a living. I can’t tell you the details of his death, and I can’t tell you the details of the vengeance I take.”

Auntie Fumiko: “That was all rather obvious by this house and by how everyone acted at the funeral. Not to mention all the guns. I understand. I’d feel better just knowing whomever is responsible is in the dirt.”

Kyle: “You’re a wise woman. Alright, you remember how you found Yoshiro in the first place last year?”

Auntie Fumiko: “Of course. I contacted a friend and she traced the service number on his armor. Why?”

Kyle: “Can your friend still be reached?”

Auntie Fumiko: “Yes, she can. What’s she to do?”

Kyle: “I need her to trace a serial number and get all information on that synthetic’s owner she can.”

Auntie Fumiko: “Yes, that can be done. It’s very cold, may we go inside?”

Kyle: “Yes. And about that; do you want to stay on Mars?”

Auntie Fumiko: “Until it’s all cleared, yes. Are you kicking me out?”

Kyle laughed.

Kyle: “Auntie, you can stay as long as you like, but I don’t think you’d be comfortable. I think you’d be better off at one of the resorts near here, or one of the hotels in the city.”

“Well,” Auntie Fumiko said after a moment, “I suppose I would like my own bed and a proper teapot.”

“It’s settled then,” Kyle said, “I’ll fly you tonight with David after we look at photographs.”

By this point, Kyle and Auntie Fumiko had reached the house, and entered. Someone fetched glasses and an ice bucket, the bottle of plum wine was opened, and all sat to look at

Tsurabaya's photographs. There were many they didn't recognize. It was a sobering reminder of all the life Tsurabaya had lived in secret as a child. The ones the Medusas did recognize were candids, which he must have snapped with his wrist computer's built in camera. So, save for the candids, the remaining photos were sent with Auntie Fumiko. Someone pulled up a list of the resorts in the Valles Marineris region, and David set off for one with Auntie Fumiko. Kyle chose, after a moment's deliberation, to stay behind after all. He had another thing he wanted to do as part of his revenge plan.

"I think I want to make an offering," Kyle told the others, "I may not come back before sunrise. Don't worry about me."

"Dad, are you alright?" Max asked concernedly. "You and him were close."

"Everyone was," Kyle said briskly, and left.

The excuse, and the appearance of a breakdown, were lies on Kyle's part. Kyle was sad of course, as was everyone, but hardly having a breakdown. It wasn't in his programming. No, Kyle was on the way to make a gamble, and he didn't want the others to be disappointed if it didn't pay off. And so Kyle went to his little clearing, flipped open his wrist computer, and called Emmermann.

To his surprise as much as anyone else's. Emmermann answered almost immediately, a slight knowing smile on his face.

"Kyle, Kyle, Kyle," Emmermann said, "I was wondering if it would be you."

"I suppose you know what I want already, Sir," Kyle said, "and that it shouldn't be discussed on the net. May I see you?"

"Oh, what the fuck," Emmermann shrugged, "I'm on Valhalla. I'll send a transport in a few minutes."

“Thank you, Sir,” Kyle said, already thinking of the next step, “I’ll be ready.”

“I’m sure you will,” Emmermann said dryly.

Kyle withdrew into the trees and sat on a log, waiting for the transport. It was more like half an hour before the transport came, descending through the Martian night sky, magnificent as always. The transport lowered into the clearing, fortunately avoiding damaging Kyle’s altar. Kyle boarded the transport as he had so many times before, sat in one of the seats, and the ship “jumped” to orbit then lowered. Kyle’s eyes were momentarily dazzled by the Valhalla sun as he stepped off the transport. Emmermann himself stood on the landing pad.

“Greetings,” Emmermann said cordially, “I know it’ll do you no good, but I suspect I need a drink for what you’re about to say.”

Kyle chuckled at this, and he and Emmermann set up the path towards the Bavarian castle jutting from the mountain.

“Where’s Georg?” Kyle asked as they headed up the path.

“He’s with the me in Neue Frankfurt,” Emmermann explained.

“The you in Neue Frankfurt?” Kyle asked, not confused, but wanting to make sure he understood.

“I use multiple bodies Kyle, leaves me time to enjoy my whores,” Emmermann chuckled, “I get the memories melded from time to time by Dr. Tarakada, and we share the responsibilities to be fair.”

It was a theory Kyle had held for a bit. The revelation wasn’t surprising. What was a bit was Emmermann’s uncharacteristically glib and amenable nature. Perhaps the sex had done him good, or perhaps this body which Kyle engaged with was new and not programmed for engagement with his underlings. Either way, Kyle was glad he could feel less like he was dealing

with an incomprehensible puppet master, and hopefully that was true.

Emmermann led Kyle on the same route he always had through the house, to the study, and then closing the door. This time however, Emmermann reached under the desk and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of Corelian, which he poured into the glasses very generously.

"Hell of a thing, using my best whiskey on a synthetic," Emmermann said, handing over a glass which Kyle took.

"Thank you, Sir," Kyle said and took a long sip of whiskey.

Emmermann: "What the fuck do you want Kyle?"

Kyle: "Blood."

There wasn't much point being poetic about it, Kyle thought.

Emmermann: "I thought that might be your answer. I approve. But why Kyle? Why do you want to avenge your friend so much?"

Kyle: "Because… because it's my fault that he's dead."

Emmermann: "Why's it your fault that he's dead, Kyle?"

Kyle: "Because he was my soldier Sir. It was my job to protect him. Because… I fucking failed."

Emmermann: "Good answer. Now, what do you want from me to get this done?"

Kyle: "I need a gate Sir. Into New Kanazawa, the city proper, so that I and the others can kill whoever did this. We can't fly in normally, or at least I can't. They track synthetics in the city Sir."

Emmermann: "Alright."

Kyle for once was stunned into silence. Could it really be that simple?

"Are you sure, Sir?" Kyle asked.

“Yes,” Emmermann said, “I’m glad to see your vengeful side Kyle. Let me know when you’re ready for the gate, I’ll fly the team here. You want a woman before you leave?”

Kyle paused, thinking, then shook his head.

“I’m going to be celibate until blood is repaid, Sir,” Kyle said.

“That’s my-“ Emmermann began, then caught himself, cleared his throat, and said; “Like a samurai. Like your friend was. Transport is ready when you get back to the pad.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Kyle said, then turned to leave.

“Nothing is ever for free, Kyle. I hope you know that,” Emmermann said as Kyle stood in the doorway.

“Yes Sir,” Kyle said, in a voice he hoped disguised the chill that ran up his spine at Emmermann’s words and tone.

Kyle returned to Mars almost as soon as he’d left it, winding up right back in the clearing, and so as he’d wound up here anyway, he did make an offering. The sun was still a good distance from the horizon when he slipped back into the house.

“Did you get what we needed?” Max asked him from the bunk below.

“Yes,” Kyle said, deciding not to tell Max off for tracking his wrist computer, as he must have been doing to know that Kyle had been gone.

Morning came, and everyone gathered for breakfast, as usual. Kyle didn’t disturb anyone as they ate, but after breakfast, gathered everyone in the situation room.

“Alright,” Kyle said, “we’re a good way to getting our revenge. I saw our… benefactor, and he’s willing to help.”

“You’re really going through with this, aren’t you?” Klein asked.

“Yes we certainly are,” Jack said, “you’re not required to participate. But you’d be appreciated.”

“There’s no question of that,” Buchner said, “no man left behind.”

Kyle looked over the room, reading everyone’s faces. On the faces of Klein and Hofnitz, he saw a flash of reluctance. On all the others, he saw determination, and on the faces of Buchner and Harune, the determination was mixed with pure rage, as was the look on Kyle’s face no doubt. With a nod at everyone, Kyle continued the briefing.

Kyle: “Good. Now, I have a feeling we need a few bombs. David, Buchner, we’re going to Wang Yu Nong’s place. The rest of you wait for Auntie Fumiko’s input.”

Jack: “Auntie Fumiko? Why’s she involved?”

Kyle: “If Drew had died in this way, wouldn’t you want to be involved?”

“Yes, but I’m-“ Jack began, then paused and nodded. “You’re right.”

“I know I am,” Kyle said, “you two heard me. Now let’s go.”

“Yes Sir,” David said, snapping back into mission mode, as did Buchner. And so they, along with Kyle, went for one of the shuttles and headed for Wang Yu Nong’s home.

“What if he’s not in?” David asked at one point.

“Then we steal his shit and blow up his house and the relationship is off,” Kyle said flatly. He was well and truly in the anger phase of grief by now.

“Good,” Buchner said, “I never liked the son of a bitch.”

The rest of the ride passed in silence before the trio arrived at Wang Yu Nong’s palatial estate. Perhaps disappointingly, Wang was in residence after all, and willing to hand over several bombs he had on hand already, as a client had cancelled an order. At least that was what he said; in all likelihood it was because Kyle, David, and Buchner frightened him more. Either way, the group walked away with several small plasma time

bombs, and ingredients for pipe bombs. They then returned to The Eagle's Claw, to "hurry up and wait."

As the Medusas waited, Jack ordered them to begin research, particularly of various synthetic models, and also to study their maps of New Kanazawa, particularly the area around The Jukebox. He especially wanted to know all that was possible about The Jukebox's security capabilities. They caught a lucky break on these fronts; New Kanazawa's borderline apartheid system of laws meant that all publicly accessible establishments were required to make their security systems public, so that organic humans not wanting to patronize an establishment secured by synthetics needn't run the risk.

"The shit people will risk not to see a toaster," Kyle chuckled, "even to their own destruction."

The Jukebox's owner, it turned out, was a one Yukiko Matsumoto. A photograph revealed her to be the "Yuki" who had lured Tsurabaya to Wind in the Willows, which she also owned.

"She's only one of our targets," Kyle said.

"What? Why?" Hofnitz asked.

"Because," Kyle said, "the owner of one dive bar and one bordello is not rich enough to have a portal at her disposal. Nor is she rich enough to buy top of the line black market implants. No, she's a fence for someone else. And that is our target."

"How do we find this target?" Max asked; "Do we interrogate the Yuki bitch?"

"I have a feeling we'll get our answer from Auntie Fumiko," Harune said. Everyone knew better than to question one of Harune's "feelings."

And so the Medusas waited, for several hours, for Auntie Fumiko to call them. She didn't waste time in getting in touch with her friend, nor in getting in touch with the Medusas, with

information on the synthetic whose serial number was AG-0486. The one who had delivered the fatal cuts to Tsurabaya's body.

"Most of the information was blocked out on the client," Auntie Fumiko said, "all we know is that it's a woman. Aimi Taro. She lives in Natsukara's Hope, on the other side of the same planet as New Kanazawa. I sent you a photograph."

"Does she have a Soul Byte?" Kyle asked.

"Yes," Auntie Fumiko said sadly, "I hope you can overcome that. Can I help in any other way?"

"Enjoy your hotel, Auntie," Jack said, "we'll tell you when it's done."

When he'd hung up, Jack turned back around to the group.

Jack: "Do any of you have Yoshi Arasaka's dial code? I forget where I wrote it down."

Harune: "I do. Why?"

Jack: "I want to have him make sure that this cunt's Soul Byte data is wiped."

Kovac: "Can he do that?"

Kyle: "I think he can, yes. Send him a message Harune. Have him call the house as soon as possible."

Harune: "Aye, Sir."

With that, Harune left the room to type out his message. Kyle and the others halfheartedly began milling about, looking for ways to amuse themselves. Harune returned soon enough, saying he'd messaged his brother, and so once again, the waiting game resumed and continued. It continued all the rest of the day, and most of the next one too, before Yoshi contacted the Medusas.

"I'd heard you guys had lost someone," Yoshi said after the situation was explained, "but I'd no idea who. It was on a mission for the company?"

Yoshi was seated in the cockpit of the Kamuri Maru, and behind him sat a few other soldiers no one recognized. Yoshi was obviously on a mission of his own, hence why he hadn't made contact.

"Yes," Kyle said, "and we need a guarantee."

Yoshi: "What can I do?"

Kyle: "We know who's responsible. Or at least we suspect. And she has a Soul Byte."

A pause. Slowly, Yoshi nodded, understanding Kyle's meaning.

Yoshi: "Her data will be wiped from the Net. It is company policy that whenever someone rehomes to the net, their data is first manually combed, and if they've committed a crime against the company or the Japanese people, then their data is wiped."

Jack: "Alright. When will we see you at The Hub again? It's been months."

"I'll see if I can head by when I finish this op," Yoshi promised, "I hope you've still got that Hanna working there. Over and out."

"Over and out," Kyle confirmed, switching off the television.

"Right," David said, "how do we find more about this Ms. Taro?"

"There's a data library on the planet," Kovac said, "it has records of everyone who has ever been there."

"Precisely," Kyle said, "and if the records are sealed, I'll wire myself into the server. I'm built to bypass any firewalls."

"So when do we fucking go?" Max asked, sounding almost excited.

"Tomorrow," Jack said after a pause, "I'll let my father know to send a transport in the morning. I hope we know what we're doing."

“So do I,” Kyle said, his mind already constructing contingency plans in its lightning fast and generally flawless way, and quite quickly hitting on a flaw; “In fact we don’t, because we haven’t hit upon how we get to Natsukara’s Hope.”

“Isn’t there transportation?” someone asked.

“He’s right,” Klein said, “we’ll be without documents.”

“Ask The Old Man for another gate?” Hofnitz asked.

“No,” Kyle said quickly, “we can’t do that.”

A pause.

“No gates at all,” Kyle said at last.

“Then how do we-“ Kovac began.

“Prometheus is going to hide me,” Kyle said, “in the Core Room. She hides the Core Room’s existence from every security team.”

“And after we’ve been on a tirade of destruction? You think they’ll just let us through the port again?” Max asked.

“I didn’t say it was flawless,” Kyle said, “but it’s what I’ve got. And yes, I think we’ll manage. This was never to be without risk. So get some sleep, we’ve a long way to go.”

Kyle didn’t sleep that night, of course. He hadn’t slept a wink since Yoshiro’s death; it was a good thing he didn’t need to. No, Kyle had been up all these nights thinking, to satiate his rage. On this night, he thought about where it had gone wrong. His mind began to scan everything that had happened in The Jukebox, analyzing frame by frame to figure out if he’d seen or done something to give the game away, resulting in Tsurabaya being exposed. And on this night, he was fairly sure he found it.

Inside of The Jukebox or on the approach, Kyle couldn’t find any point at which he or Tsurabaya had slipped up. Unless The Jukebox had a telepathy scanner, which Kyle doubted, the slip up and catching had most likely occurred after exiting The Jukebox, when Kyle and Tsurabaya had stopped to laugh.

Slowly, the threads came piece by piece. In The Jukebox, Kyle had noticed a few tiny black insects that looked like small lacewings flying about. Security surveillance drones, he'd known at the time, as he hadn't seen a single insect in the colony, which was noticeable, given the amount of open air street food. But at one point, as Kyle and Tsurabaya had paused on the street to laugh, an insect had flown by. In memory now, Kyle registered the buzz, and remembered Tsurabaya swatting at his own neck, as if annoyed by an insect.

"A drone," Kyle whispered to himself, "a fucking DNA gatherer drone!"

Now it clicked. Yukiko Matsumoto, wanting to check up on her new client, had sent a drone after him and gathered a bit of DNA, say from a near microscopic bit of skin, and had found that he wasn't who he claimed. This she had reported presumably to Aimi Taro, for whom she fenced implants, and had the latter had opened a portal and sent in her synthetic who had carried out the orders to kill Tsurabaya. All that remained was proof. In any case, it meant that Yuki was to be the first target.

Morning came, and all the Medusas began gearing up, then began heading for Prometheus. Kyle had half expected the general bloodlust to have died down at this last stage, but quite the opposite had happened. Rather, the talk of sweet revenge only increased.

For the flight, Kyle went with all the weapons straight to the Core Room. Here, he told Prometheus that she was to hide him in here by any means necessary.

"You're the only one with access to the room," Prometheus pointed out.

"Yes, I suppose I am," Kyle said thoughtfully, then sat on the floor, then thought of a question; "Prometheus, do you think what I'm feeling is real?"

“Well Captain,” Prometheus said thoughtfully after a moment, “do you think so?”

“Yes I do,” Kyle said, “but I also think artificial intelligences like us are prone to questioning what’s in our code.”

“I believe you’re right Captain,” Prometheus murmured thoughtfully, “is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Kyle said after a moment, “but goddamn it, I wish I didn’t.”

“Because you miss your friend and wish you weren’t questioning your grief?” Prometheus asked.

“Yes,” Kyle said, then settled into silence, feeling Prometheus lift.

The 30 hour trip passed about as quickly as one could hope. Kyle was grateful for the silence and occasional non-boisterous company in the Core Room. While there, Kyle built a few pipe bombs. Might as well be efficient, he thought.

“We’re exiting subspace, Captain,” Prometheus announced at last, “stay where you are.”

“I wasn’t planning on anything else,” Kyle said, and he hadn’t.

And so Kyle waited in the Core Room for at least 20 minutes, hearing the muffled jackboot steps and voices of New Kanazawa’s port security personnel, then when they’d left, the return of momentum on Prometheus’s part, lowering down to the port’s landing pad.

“You’re clear, Captain,” Prometheus said at last.

With that, Kyle left the core room, weapons in tow in the bags.

“Let’s do this,” Jack said, “for Yoshiro.”

“For Yoshiro!” the others echoed, and set for a shuttle, which David then flew into the city, then landed to allow weapons to be distributed.

Everyone got a pistol, an extra charge pack for that pistol, and a pipe bomb. The full bombs were stored securely in a locked box on the shuttle for later use. Kyle held onto Tsurabaya's Arasaka sword, to put the finishing touch on the revenge. Before any blood could be spilled, it was decided to head towards the data library.

The data library was massive, in a huge baroque style building, one of the few European buildings in New Kanazawa. The inside was grand and marble, and the "shelves" were in fact row upon row upon row of servers, the ports and such covered by sheets of glass painted to look like bookshelves. At one end each of the server "shelves" were sit down computer consoles where one could sit and do one's research, the light from the consoles, servers, and the muted orange light of the library's grand chandelier being the main lights in the building. Kyle went in with Kovac and Harune.

"I need to be fully wired in to a server," Kyle said telepathically, "we need to head for one of the ones out of the way. Upstairs to the back should be good."

Harune and Kovac nodded lightly, and the three made for the stairs. Very few of the consoles on this floor were in use, and so picking one deep in the back as Kyle had suggested was quite effective. Helpfully, Harune produced a small plasma edged switchblade, and after checking for laser wires and the like, and finding none, Kyle carefully cut out a square of the glass covering the side of the server, located a wire, and then with his KA-Bar, stripped said wire carefully. Then came the painful part, wherein Kyle cut open a vein on his left arm, exposing a wire inside.

"Alright," Kyle said, "I'm diving now. I need you both to watch my front and back."

"Yes Sir," Kovac said.

With that, Kyle cut the stripped wire on the server in half, then wound it around his body's own wire. Instantly, he was totally in the server, in an ocean of binary code that he could read and navigate by pure instinct. And so by pure instinct, he found his way right to all information on Aimi Taro, and all her associated businesses. He assimilated it all in seconds, logging it to his brain, hoping it could be neural linked to his wrist computer, and then turning off the server entirely, severing the link and waking him back up in the physical world.

"I got everything I could," Kyle said, untangling the server's wire from his own, "I think I know what we do. Let's get back to the shuttle."

And so Kyle, Harune, and Kovac left for the shuttle. None stopped them as they left; they'd not been caught. They reentered the shuttle to a sea of expectant faces.

"Well?" Joshie asked.

"Ms. Taro is a major Yakuza figure," Kyle explained, "and that must be why she's never been investigated by the police. She owns a massive hotel called The Paradise. It's all staffed and run by synthetics of course, who operate on a hive mind from a Soul Byte computer in the basement."

"How do we deal with that?" Hofnitz asked.

"We deal with that when it's time," Jack cut in, "for now we handle Yuki."

With that, Jack read off the address of The Jukebox, and whoever was flying the shuttle took off for it, landing a few blocks away, after thoroughly taking in the streets and alleyways around The Jukebox. Slowly, but determinedly, everyone geared up.

"Alright," Kyle said, "at the door, there's a human security guard. We take him out, then we go in guns blazing, take out the

synthetics at the table left of the door. Don't hit Yuki. We're going to make her suffer."

"Death by a hundred cuts?" Max asked.

"You bet your ass," Kyle said, feeling such cold rage that it surprised even him. Even more surprising to him was that he didn't care.

"Deploy," Jack ordered, once all had concealed their weapons.

Their weapons in reach, particularly knives, the Medusas approached The Jukebox. Max killed the security guard simply by pushing on the side of his head, causing instant internal decapitation. Up the multicolored stairs, into the club they went. Yuki sat at the same table, and after a scan of the club, Jack gave a nod, and all hell broke loose. Guns were pulled, and instantly the screaming began, the patrons scattering in all directions. The guard synthetics seated around the round table by the door leapt to their feet, to be just as quickly cut down by a volley of plasma pistol fire.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw an expensive white coat attempting to flee, and seeing it was Yuki, reached out and grabbed her by her hair, picked her up by it, and held her by it so she had eye contact with him.

"Do you fucking remember me?" Kyle asked in a mock friendly tone, then threw a screaming Yuki against a table.

"Scream louder, maybe someone will hear you in time, unlike my uncle, you bitch!" Harune said, fairly screaming the last word as he stepped forward, delivering the first cut.

Yuki shot to her feet. I'll spare the reader the exceedingly graphic details of how the Medusas, their rage finally set free, delivered cut after cut and stab after stab to all over Yuki's body. It was Buchner who executed what was likely the coup de grâce; a slow, deep throat slash. Yuki was then left twitching on the

floor of The Jukebox, her eyes totally lifeless as her nervous system learned she was dead.

"Get her PAC," Kyle ordered, indicating where said device had fallen, "and get the data shard out of that security camera over the bar."

Hurriedly, one person grabbed each of these things. Jack hopped over the bar and began grabbing bottles of alcohol, then began throwing them with abandon around the bar, hard enough that they shattered. Seeing what he was doing, two others joined in. The Medusas then hurriedly ran for the back door of The Jukebox, and whoever was bringing up the rear threw in a match or lighter, setting The Jukebox ablaze once and for all. The door off the back of course merely led deeper into the skyscraper building, The Jukebox being on the second floor, but the Medusas reached the alleyways soon enough, and the hidden shuttle soon enough again. Only then did they look around at each other.

Remarkably, the crew had very little blood on them. None had any cuts of course, and they'd all kept their blades at arm's length most of the time. There was hardly a teaspoon of blood between them.

"I think we'd best go," Jack said quietly after several minutes, the adrenaline seeming to finally calm for the group.

"Yes," Kyle said equally quietly. None spoke as they flew back to the spaceport and deboarded into Prometheus once again, then made their way to the bridge.

"Okay," Kyle said, taking a seat, "let's see that PAC and data shard. Then we can talk."

Someone produced the PAC, and another the data shard. To begin with, Kyle inserted the data shard into the PAC, the shard containing not only the camera's data, but also all information from the security system inside The Jukebox. Kyle rewound the

data to the date of Tsurabaya's death. Here, his theory was confirmed; a drone had been sent to gather a piece of DNA from Tsurabaya. And so his fate had been sealed once this drone had been successful.

"Now we know," Kyle said, wiping away a tear.

Harune picked up the PAC, and then himself sat and began looking through it. He found all that was left; proof that Yuki had been fencing her black market Daishono implants from Aimi Taro.

"Alright," Kyle said, looking over the Medusas, "I have a request. Not an order; a request."

"You want to finish it, don't you Dad?" Max said, always one step ahead of the pack where his father was concerned.

"Yes," Kyle admitted, "it was my job to keep him alive and-"

"I can live with that," Harune cut in, "I'm not all that enthusiastic about what's left."

"Nor I," Klein said. And so a general consensus was reached.

"Alright," Jack said finally, "fire it up David. Give the city a last once over before you head for Natsukara's Hope. Let's get a last look at his home."

"I like that idea," Prometheus told Kyle telepathically, which made Kyle smile, both for her flash of sentiment and her reluctance to show her approval to anyone other than her captain.

Everyone crowded the windows, looking out at New Kanazawa for a final time. One last look at the neon city of endless night which had once been Tsurabaya's home. Viewed this way, and now as a tomb, it was almost beautiful in its way. A good interlude, but the Medusas had come for a purpose, and so they must follow through. Thus, David lifted Prometheus, up through the atmosphere and back to the planet's orbit. Someone packaged the PAC and data shard as evidence, to be sent in at the end of the mission. Under Jack's order, Buchner

went to the shuttle and gathered the bombs. David left Prometheus to idle in orbit while the bombs were explained in the lounge.

Buchner laid out the bombs on the lounge's central table and explained. The bombs were of the computer operated variety, with small pocket computers as part of the detonation interface, linkable to one's wrist computer quite easily. They were linked to Kyle's wrist computer, though he was determined to only use them if necessary. Much like with Yuki, he wanted to make sure that Aimi Taro suffered as Tsurabaya had. This all explained and decided, Kyle returned to the Core Room with the weapons, and David swung Prometheus around to the day side of the planet, to face Natsukara's Hope.

Natsukara's Hope, and indeed the day side of the planet, were massively different, as one might expect. Prometheus was kind enough to project the scenery into Kyle's head. While New Kanazawa had existed in frigid cold amidst an endless ocean, the day side of the planet was mostly land, and covered in pastel foliage. Kyle saw one bit of wildlife; a monstrous brown creature that looked like a warped mix of elephant and caterpillar, with at least 20 segments, wound around half of a large hill.

Natsukara's Hope was also in many ways a mirror image of New Kanazawa. Much like its counterpart, it sat in two segments, joined by a bridge, though this one was all on land, and then a third segment which was the spaceport. While the spaceport did sit beneath a force field, the city segments did not; rather, they sat beneath geodesic domes of pale yellow transparent glass, no doubt polarized against the permanent sun. The city inside, judging by the flyby, was once again very futuristic, yet had far less neon, and far fewer private vehicles, and indeed less glass and chrome, with far more buildings built of other materials and painted or architectured to look pretty,

and traditional Japanese buildings in general were fairly common. It was a tourist's paradise.

After the usual security procedure, David set Prometheus down at the Natsukara's Hope spaceport, and Kyle once again left the Core Room, weapons concealed, and the Medusas entered a shuttle to find their way to The Paradise for reconnaissance.

The Paradise, it turned out, was a white high rise hotel, surrounded by other high rise and skyscraper hotels. Aimi Taro, Kyle knew from the records, lived somewhere inside, but not knowing where, he decided they'd best not barge in, and so they instead got a hotel room from a much taller neighboring hotel, from where they could observe comings and goings in and out of The Paradise. It wasn't long before they saw Aimi Taro exiting a shuttle in front of the hotel to enter it.

"This bitch has no idea, does she?" Franz asked distantly as he observed her through one of his digital scopes.

"No idea of what?" Kovac asked.

"How close she is to the end," Franz said, making a gun gesture.

"No idea at all," Kyle said, "watch where she goes."

Aimi Taro, it turned out, lived somewhere rather vulnerable; in the glass penthouse atop The Paradise. She lived here with a single guard model synthetic which she also used for sex. Kyle, on a hunch, zoomed in on the synthetic's chest, reading his serial number; AG-0486. The same synthetic which had done the deed against Tsurabaya.

"We know all we can know," Kyle said, "now I need someone to volunteer to take over the hotel's AI."

When all had turned to stare at Kyle as if he had two heads from this statement, he explained the failsafe in the hotel's AI wetware interface. If the Soul Byte was removed, there was

about three seconds of cool down before the system went into lockdown. During these three seconds, a personnel needle, inserted to the brainstem, much like the one Kyle had been hooked into in order to interface with Kanshi, would allow a human or synthetic to hook into the system and take over the AI. Harune volunteered to jump all into the basement of The Paradise, and Jack volunteered to be the one hooked into the system.

The interlude which precisely followed is something of a blur. I can only say that Harune successfully "jumped" all into the basement of The Paradise, which was full of servers. Harune laughed at Aimi Taro's arrogance in not having a laser defensive grid in her basement. And then, the hotel's Soul Byte, swimming in its little tank of synthetic neurochemicals, was removed, and Jack was wired into the system. Harune then "jumped" Kyle to back outside The Paradise, and here clarity returns.

Kyle walked through the lobby of The Paradise unmolested. As Jack now ran the hotel's AI hivemind, none of the staff, all of whom were synthetics on the hivemind, gave Kyle any trouble as he made for and boarded the penthouse elevator, riding up and emerging in Aimi Taro's penthouse.

Aimi Taro stood on the other side of the elevator, looking up in obvious shock as Kyle entered, the microphone on his wrist computer on so the others could listen in as he finished the deed.

"Who the fuck are you?" Taro demanded in English.

"Nobody important," Kyle said as he pulled out his pistol and shot Taro in the ankle, blasting off her foot and leaving her to fall to the white marble floor, screaming.

At Taro's screams, her guard synthetic, who apparently wasn't part of the hotel hive mind, came running into the room. Kyle delivered a quick six shots to the synthetic's head, glad the

synthetic was a slave no longer. Then, with a sadistic thrill, Kyle shot off Taro's other foot, then stood tapping his own, looking impatient as Taro finally finished screaming.

"Who the fuck are you?" Taro demanded again, tears of pain pouring down her face.

"Like I said," Kyle said, "nobody important. In fact I'm here for your benefit. You'll get a regeneration in a few hours if you help me and my employers."

"How? Who do you work for? Der Bund?" Taro demanded.

"Gold star!" Kyle said condescendingly; "Look, the act is up. We know about your black market Daishono implants. Just show them to me, and I'll call my bosses. Tell them you're a good girl. But for every time you refuse, I'll shoot you again. And it won't be in places that'll kill you. Just places that hurt. Am I fucking clear?"

With a gulp of pain, Taro nodded, and then almost to Kyle's disappointment, rolled over to her front and began crawling on all fours through the house. She crawled a long ways, leaving a trail of blood behind, and on the walls, Kyle noticed a lot of framed photographs. One in particular caught his attention and so he grabbed it for in a few minutes.

Aimi Taro reached her large bedroom, which had a pink fluffy carpet. Still on all fours, she crawled to a cabinet set up against one wall and opened it, revealing an antique safe, into which she hurriedly dialed a combination, then pulled out a cardboard hatbox, which she flipped open and set on the floor. Kyle sauntered closer and took a look, seeing it was full of tiny implants of all kinds. He smiled.

"That's all I have on site," Taro said, "the rest is in my bank vault a couple of blocks away."

"In your own name?" Kyle asked.

“Yes,” Taro said, starting to sound desperate, her pride cracking.

“There’s a lot in that box already,” Kyle said, “enough to kill for if I know my implants.”

Taro simply gulped, and a moment of silence followed.

“Will you call in please? I did what you wanted,” Taro asked.

“Oh, yes of course,” Kyle said pleasantly, “but one thing I’m curious about. Who is this young man?”

Kyle held out the picture in its frame that he’d gotten from the hallway, which showed Aimi Taro with a visibly younger man, both smiling widely on opposite sides of an outdoor table.

“That’s my baby brother,” Taro said, seeming to be beginning to relax in Kyle’s presence as she gave the answer Kyle had been able to intuit from the photo already.

“Ah,” Kyle said, still sounding pleasant, “are you close?” What’s his name?”

“Yes, we’re close,” Taro said, “his name is Keichi. Keichi Taro.”

“Keichi Taro… Keichi Taro,” Kyle mused, “that’s a good name.”

With that, Kyle turned from Taro, slowly setting the photo of her and her brother down on a small table back beside the bedroom door. And then slowly, deliberately, Kyle pulled something from his waistband; Tsurabaya’s plasma-edged Arasaka sword, which he clicked the button on and extended, then turned around again.

Kyle watched with joy as the blood drained from Aimi Taro’s face as he spoke to her, in flawless Japanese for the first time she’d heard, the last words she would ever hear in her life;

“Mukashi, boku wa mo otōto ga imashita. Namae wa Tsurabaya Yoshiro deshita!.”

After a pause, as Kyle at last released all the feelings of rage he’d held in, and seen them complete their goal, he finally held

up his wrist computer to his mouth and spoke to the group who had heard the whole thing.

"It's done," Kyle said, "the local cops will have a field day with what's in this bitch's apartment. Let's go home."

Back on board Prometheus, the Medusas went back to Mars almost normal again, their rage satiated, their mission successful. They arrived back at The Eagle's Claw at dinnertime, and ate with their spirits lifted, and afterward, it was decided they'd call Auntie Fumiko to tell her the good news. Kyle felt he had one thing left to do, and so made his excuses and stole away from the group, a flask of Corelian in his pocket, to his sanctum in the woods.

Once here, Kyle gathered sticks, slowly and reverently building a pyre with them, then he pulled a log to sit in front of them, and at last, from the pocket of his flight jacket, he pulled the letter Tsurabaya had left him, and then at last, pulled it out to read. It read as the following.

To my brother Kyle-

Well, my friend. If you're reading this, I guess it means that I'm gone, and that you are, for an indeterminate time, still alive, hopefully in good condition.

I suppose one should say something about your accomplishments; that you're a hell of a soldier, that you sure can charm a woman, or that your son's have the best father a man could wish for. All those things would be true, but you already know them. No, I'm going to be rather selfish and tell you something you never knew you did for me.

Kyle, you surprised me. In my time, I've known a lot of people who've come and gone. I'd have thought I'd seen it all. I'd have never thought anyone, much less a synthetic, could do what you

have done and inspire to do in the world we live in; you became and remain your own man. And not just your own man, but a good man. A foul mouthed, fast shooting, skirt chasing bastard, but still a good man. And that is worth a thousand lifetimes to see.

I don't know what state the crew may exist in, should circumstances conspire for me to have crossed over before you do. And so I'll tell you what I'll tell every member of the crew, if I should die while it's still in existence; be all you were intended to be. You'll know when the time is right what that means.

For you specifically Kyle, I must say two things; the first is, don't cry for me for too long, and try not to let my passing change you. I know I was your friend, as you were mine, but nothing lasts forever, except the soul, and I know with the ultimate conviction that we will meet again. I'll wait for you in Valhalla, but until that day, I command you to always be yourself and be happy.

Another personal note, Kyle, is that I know you'll always let Max and Harune be their own men, even if it means temporarily letting them go. And I say temporarily, because while I may not know much, I know this beyond a shadow of a doubt; boys who love their fathers always find a way back home.

I suppose I should say something poignant about what I've learned, but I don't think the purpose of life is to learn, and in any case, I can't do much better than the great Joni Mitchell when she said; "I really don't know life at all."

Please never forget me or the smiles I brought you.

Good luck, and Godspeed.

Your loving Brother

Yoshiro Tsurabaya, (callsign Perseus)

Encased with the letter was a 2.5x4-inch black and white photograph. It was from the mission in Okinawa where Kyle and Tsurabaya had first met. The photograph was of Kyle and Tsurabaya, on the dock outside the mission house, standing shirtless and in their bathing suits, dripping wet, making silly faces for the camera as they held up a large tuna they'd caught. The writing on the back of the photograph read; "Okinawa, 1939."

"I could never forget you," Kyle said through tears as he carefully placed the photograph in his wallet, to keep there until his dying day.

Then, resolutely, Kyle placed the letter and its envelope atop the little pyre he'd built, raised his flask of Corelian to the sky, and took a long slow shot of it. He then poured the rest of the flask's contents over the pyre, and then pulled out his lighter.

"Goodbye, my dearest friend," Kyle whispered as he lit the pyre.

"Until Valhalla."

Author's note. For once, I'm at a loss for words. I hope I've imparted as much emotion as I may expect to.

Chapter 19

Once the Medusas had gotten their revenge for Tsurabaya's murder, normal life inevitably had to return. And so it did for a few days, with the Medusas living as they usually did when on Mars, their time divided between The Glass Hub and The Eagle's Claw, awaiting the next work contract, having filed their full report to Arasaka Robotics. It pained them, but they knew they must also begin looking for a replacement, as they couldn't well afford to be down an infantryman.

On one morning, not more than a couple of days past the revenge, Kyle was in the kitchen, helping to prepare breakfast, specifically the coffee. Kyle always made the coffee, at his own insistence. In his own words; "If I wanted sewage, I'd ask for sewage. It's cheaper."

As Kyle stood over the coffee materials, Harune approached him.

Harune: "Can we talk, Father?"

Kyle: "Any time. What would you like to talk about?"

"I meant alone," Harune said with an eye roll.

"Oh," Kyle said sheepishly, "alright. After breakfast, I'd thought I might go fish for our dinner. You can come with me."

And so the morning passed over the breakfast table, with Kyle wondering the entire time what Harune might have to say that he felt the need to be alone with Kyle to say it. As far as Kyle could recall, neither he nor Harune had deliberately talked

alone since "the talk." And so he rather sped through his breakfast, then sped through gathering his fishing accoutrements, at which point he was joined by Harune.

And so father and son walked a good distance around the lake, Kyle making sure they were well away from prying ears before he sat with Harune on a log and began unpacking tackle and such to fish.

"So tell me Little Boy Blue," Kyle said as he cast his line, "what's up that you wanted to talk to me alone out here? Did you get a girl pregnant or something?"

"No, Father," Harune giggled, "it's nothing like that."

"Oh," Kyle said, both very relieved and the tiniest bit disappointed, "what is it then?"

"Father," Harune said with a deep breath, "I want to go to flight school. David taught me so much, but I'm grounded until I get my certifications."

Kyle paused, considering.

Kyle: "I know you've wanted to fly Prometheus. But Harune, flying is a dangerous job. Shit, and it takes so long to learn. What if-"

"No," Harune said firmly, "no negotiation. Uncle Yoshiro said you'd always try and protect me-"

"Of course I will," Kyle cut in almost defensively, "I love you more than I can imagine. You're my son."

"And he also said," Harune cut in, "that it's my job to be all I'm meant to be. I don't know why the Gods have let me have so many capabilities, but I know I'm not being all I'm meant to be when I can't use them all. Right?"

Kyle opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again as his computer brain saw the objective facts.

"Odin's Balls," Kyle blasphemed ruefully, "I can't argue with that logic, you little bastard."

"So is that a yes?" Harune beamed eagerly.

"From my part, it's a yes," Kyle said with a smile, then wrapped an arm around Harune, drawing him close and mussing his hair. Harune giggled.

"Won't be tomorrow of course," Kyle cautioned, "I'll have to tell The Old Man, and he'll have to sign your contract release forms, and so will Jimmy. But I'll do that all. When shall we tell the others?"

"When it's all decided," Harune said after a pause.

"Alright," Kyle agreed, "I'm proud of you Kid."

"I'm proud of me too," Harune smiled.

"Of course, all my men need to be as useful as possible," Emmermann said dismissively once Kyle at last was able to call Georg and be patched through; "I'll have the paperwork ready and signed before my day is up."

"Very well Sir," Kyle said, "and now I believe I'm going to call in that favor I backed out of recently; I need a new infantryman."

"I believe one is on his way already," Emmermann said with the classic German shrug.

"From you?" Kyle asked.

"He's from The Company, if the paperwork I was sent is to be believed," Emmermann said, "but since you've asked twice, you now owe me two favors. No, three after I fixed your bar."

"I understand, Sir," Kyle said, once again feeling manipulated by Emmermann.

"Sieg Heil. Over and out," Emmermann finished, as usual, with Kyle echoing his words.

"We have our new infantryman coming in from The Company, apparently," was the only of the two pieces of news which Kyle announced that night. It sparked the usual sort of murmurs and musings and muted excitement.

Said murmurs and musings and muted excitement weren't to last terribly long. It was the next day, in early afternoon probably, when The Eagle's Claw's new security system gave off an alert; "Unauthorized spacecraft in orbit of airspace. Craft registered to company: Arasaka Robotics. Permit landing?"

"Permit landing," Jack authorized.

I realize that until this point, I've not properly described the new security systems which were put in place on The Eagle's Claw and The Glass Hub following the assault on the latter. As the same system was put into place for both locations, I'll thus describe it here.

For both of these properties, Emmermann had set up plasma forcefield dome shields, which emanated from black bands rising a few feet from the ground. Each one was armed with a turret tower containing a plasma anti-aircraft machine gun and several surface to air homing missiles, also of the plasma variety. On each turret tower was a radar scanning system, whose computer would not only see all incoming ships or vehicles, but would read all registration in an instant. The turret's AI had been connected to not only the in-building AIs of both The Glass Hub and The Eagle's Claw, but to all of the Medusas' wrist computers and Prometheus. With a single order, a ship or ground vehicle would be destroyed in a matter of seconds by the turrets.

In the case of The Eagle's Claw, the outside of the forcefield had a hard light holographic projected image of the land with no buildings, which made the estate invisible from above until one was granted access, not only to the naked eye, but to any and all thermal or GPR scans available on the market at the time.

With the authorization, the force field pulled away, and the Medusas, already piling out onto the porch, got a look at their

new arrival at last. At this point of course, they couldn't see anything, save for one of the black craft resembling a pyramid on its side that seemed standard for Arasaka Robotics. The craft landed next to Prometheus, and a single personnel offloaded. He wore a black smartsuit and flight jacket, and a helmet which obscured his face. Kyle and Jack stepped to the forefront, but the obscured Arasaka man stepped right past them to stand in front of Max.

"Don't you recognize your old friends?" The young man asked as he at last removed his helmet, in time to watch Max's eyes widen into shock, then instantly into happiness.

"Saito!" Max exclaimed; "Ryuji Saito! How fucking long has it been?"

Kyle stepped around the newcomer to get a better look. Indeed, it was Max's early adolescence friend and Tsurabaya's old apprentice, Ryuji Saito, now a man of about 20, at least so was his body's appearance, though he carried himself with an ease and confidence which belied he was considerably older, and there was some amount of time looping involved, not to mention that it must've taken quite some time to accumulate all of the patches on his jacket.

"You're my new infantryman eh?" Jack asked rhetorically.

"The company wanted someone keeping an eye on their investments they might make, and it has to be someone you all knew," Saito shrugged, "so I guess I'm kinda it."

"So you're a corporate spy," Buchner said with just a hint of bitterness in her voice.

"Hey!" Joshie cut in; "Your ship is leaving!"

All eyes turned back towards the horizon, seeing that the black sideways pyramid craft which Saito had arrived in was lifting back off the ground, and a few seconds later, had taken off with extreme speed towards space.

"Should I call them back?" Jack asked, flipping open his wrist computer.

"No point, really," Saito said, "I've come with my body and my clothes. They weren't fans of personal affects on the ship they sent me from, and my service weapon is in the armory until my contract here ends."

"I'm the armorer," Buchner said, "let's go find you a kit."

"I guess he doesn't even get to meet us all or eat or take a piss before he has a gun in his hands," Harune muttered dryly as Saito and Buchner set off for the little armory building.

"I'll make him a coffee," Kyle said, "guess we'd better start getting used to having someone in Yoshiro's bunk again."

The announcement of Harune's departure came far sooner than Kyle had secretly hoped for, yet much later than he'd anticipated. Perhaps Emmermann had decided to allow a weekend for the new infantryman to settle in before sending in the papers. For his part, Saito settled in very well. He was quiet, as grunts go, and though not too quiet as to be incongruous with the Medusas. In particular, Harune was glad to once again have someone to chat to in his mother tongue, while Saito was just grateful for the downtime and Net access, so that he could read and do the other things he'd been unable to do on his last posting, where they'd (perhaps quite literally) "kept me in a box," as he put it.

But inevitably, the break which had followed Tsurabaya's death had to end. The back order for possible work contracts had to begin being filled, and Harune had to be on his way. Harune and Kyle would have no doubt preferred to make the announcement themselves, but the decision was made for them when Emmermann put in a call to The Eagle's Claw, broadcasting right to the living room television.

"Greetings!" Emmermann said after the usual pleasantries with Jack and Kyle, "the boy's transfer papers are ready. I'll send them to yours and his glass pads along with marching orders immediately."

"What boy's transfer papers?" Joshie asked from the edge of the room; "Who is leaving us?"

Looking rather sheepish, Harune stepped into view from an adjoining room, raising one hand.

"I'm leaving. Going to flight school," Harune said. As Harune spoke, Emmermann ended the transmission, leaving the Medusas alone once again.

"Why didn't you fucking tell me?" Joshie exploded; "You didn't fucking tell anyone!"

"I told Father," Harune said sheepishly.

"I'm… your best friend. You had no fucking right," Joshie spat bitterly, then turned and stormed off through the house.

"I'm… sorry," Harune muttered, turning and running out the front door.

"Let him go," Kyle said to the several who moved to follow either Joshie or Harune, "let them both go, they'll get over themselves soon enough."

Whether Kyle was right about this, ultimately, is up for debate, for the time being at any rate. Before Harune left, Joshie wouldn't say a word to Harune, and refused to even come with him when he left for navigator school, nearly a Martian week after the announcement. But, on his last night at The Glass Hub, Harune dedicated his last song to "Joshie and all my friends." Said song was the following.

All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go.
I'm standin' here outside your door.
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye.

But the dawn is breakin', it's early morn,
The taxi is waitin', he's blowin' his horn.
Already I'm so lonesome I could die.

So kiss me and smile for me,
Tell me that you'll wait for me,
Hold me like you'll never let me go.
'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane,
Don't know when I'll be back again.
Oh babe, I hate to go.

There's so many times I've let you down,
So many times I've played around.
I'll tell you now, they don't mean a thing.
Every place I go I'll think of you,
Every song I sing I'll sing for you.
When I come back, I'll bring your wedding ring.

So kiss me and smile for me,
Tell me that you'll wait for me,
Hold me like you'll never let me go.
'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane,
Don't know when I'll be back again.
Oh babe, I hate to go.

Now the time has come to leave you.
One more time, let me kiss you.
Close your eyes, I'll be on my way.
Dream about the days to come,
When I won't have to leave alone,
About the times I won't have to say.

Oh, kiss me and smile for me,
Tell me that you'll wait for me,
Hold me like you'll never let me go.
'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane,
Don't know when I'll be back again.
Oh babe, I hate to go.

But, I'm leavin' on a jet plane,
Don't know when I'll be back again.
Oh babe, I hate to go.

Morning came, and so did the time for Harune's hopefully temporary exit from The Medusas, and so he must be flown to Der Universität Heimatschild des Mars, in the vicinity of Neu Berlin. Kyle, David, and Max accompanied him, in Prometheus's shuttle, to the spaceport, below ground, to the underground maglev, and along all the stops until reaching the station for the university. This station, unlike the immaculate and fancy ones in the city and outlying towns, was all black and white and spartan, with a very tight security line to enter, where one had to show one's papers. At the others' insistence, Harune went in first, holding up his ID card and his glass pad with his marching orders and such, which the security officer noted down piece by piece Harune's info while doing the standard questions.

Security Officer: "Please state your name for the record."

Harune: "Harune Arasaka."

Security Officer: "What is your nation of citizenship?"

Harune: "Der Bund Freier Deutscher Welten."

Security Officer: "What is your native language?"

Harune: "Japanese."

Security Officer: "What is your reason for coming to the Academy?"

Harune: "I'm hoping to gain my certifications as a combat pilot."

Security Officer: "All checks out. Head through the gate and follow the signs. Welcome aboard Son."

"Arigato gozaimasu. It's an honor," Harune said, and passed the gate.

Kyle, David, and Max all had to be given visitor's passes, and so it was several minutes before they were able to pass the gate. When they did so, there was merely a marble staircase leading up to the only public segment of the Academy. This area was an enormous circular atrium, the top half of which was a geodesic dome. The entire structure was of white marble, save for a few panels at the top of the dome, which were of glass. At the center of the atrium was a pair of gigantic crossed palms, and at their center hung a yellow and orange banner reading "Welcome to Mars" in at least 10 languages. Around the rim of the atrium were the things one might expect; an event hall for graduation, a visitor's center, a recruits center, and so on, all glass fronted bare-bones offices with lines to desks. Harune came rushing out of the recruits' office, fairly beaming as Kyle, David, and Max came up the stairs.

"They're fetching my file," Harune said, "then I get to go to the barracks, or wherever they're taking me."

Harune stepped forward, hugging David, Max, and then finally Kyle in turn. Each said something to him before he moved on to the next one.

David: "I always told you you could do it. You'll be better than me when I see you next."

Max: "No one kills you but me, you little shit. You better come back alive."

Kyle: "I'm so fuckin proud of you, Little Boy Blue. Good luck and Godspeed."

The four men just stood for a minute then, tears welling up as they tried to not cry, before Kyle broke the silence with something to the effect of; "enough gooey shit," so that they were all laughing when a short, blonde SS woman came into the visitor's foyer area.

"Herr Arasaka?" The SS woman called out over the hubbub.

"That's me," Harune said, "guess this is goodbye for now."

"We're proud of you Son," Kyle said with a smile; "go have some fun."

"I miss you all already!" Harune shouted back, just before vanishing through a side door of the foyer, led by the SS woman.

If these words were true, then Harune's million dollar smile hid it quite well.

"And then there were three," Max said, a look casting down on his face as reality set in.

"Don't worry," Kyle said, smiling more proudly and happily than he likely ever had; "he'll be back."

Author's note. A very short chapter, all told, but certainly one of the most emotional to write. I hope a modicum of this feeling is reflected in the text.

Chapter 20

Before continuing with any particularly life-altering missions, I'd like to spend this chapter and the next discussing a pair of the more mundane varieties which crossed Kyle's desk. In this chapter, I'll describe a few missions carried out by the Medusas, and in the next, I'll describe a few carried out by Kyle as a Project Phoenix operative. All of these missions took place during Harune's time at flight school. In no particular order, and without further ado, let's continue.

The first of these operations began, as so many countless did and would go on to do, in an afternoon at The Eagle's Claw. By this point, sandstorm season had arrived, and thus no one was much going outside except to get to a vehicle as quickly as possible, and so all of the Medusas were present in the house when the call for the mission came in. As usual, the call came in to the house's television. Not as usual, there was no human face hiring them; just a set of coordinates and the message; "Act immediately," followed by a promised amount of payment. The order had a Kruger Mercenaries LLC letterhead at top.

"Do they usually contact you like that?" Saito asked. I should note that by this point, Saito had been granted a callsign; Argonaut.

"They don't usually contact us at all," Jack explained, "and in a case like this it's because there's something they're embarrassed about."

"Always cleaning up shit, no matter where I get posted," Franz said. His words were grumbling, but his expression was good natured.

"Mars coordinates," David said from the edge of the room, looking at his wrist computer, "we can be there in 15 minutes if we hoof it."

"You heard the man," Kyle said briskly, "let's get a move on."

All stood, heading for their armor suits and weapons, then for Prometheus. As I've described this process so many times before, I'll not repeat it. David's estimation was quite on point, and Prometheus arrived on site no more than 15 minutes later. The sky had turned pink with dust by then, and the air was beginning to turn hazy, the sure sign of an incoming sandstorm.

"I hope this place is indoors," Kyle remarked, "or we'll have to shelter down for the night. Where the fuck is this place?"

"I'm flying right over the coordinates," David said, "best I can do."

"Look at that creek bed," someone suggested, "maybe it's an aqueduct, with how it's flowing into that mountain."

"Good idea as any," Jack shrugged, "Apollo, check out that mountain range. Maybe the coordinates weren't totally right."

"Your wish is my command, oh great one," David quipped, swinging Prometheus around to the side of the little mountain range. This time, it wasn't long before the Medusas spotted their quarry, or at least evidence of it.

On the bottom side of one mountain was a large, circular steel and concrete door, perhaps 70 feet in diameter. This door hung open, and coming out of it was a row of mutilated corpses, all visibly unarmed and in civilian clothing, and clearly all having been fleeing something quite ferocious.

"Land the ship," Jack said, "let's go in and look."

David landed the ship, all hurriedly gathering their weapons already, putting on their helmets, etcetera.

"Alright people," Kyle said, "we go in formation. This is an active threat situation. Don't fuck it up."

With Kyle in front as per usual, the Medusas exited Prometheus, heading towards the open door and concrete tunnel. As Kyle had instructed, they all walked behind him in formation, covering the full 360 degrees of view. Inside the tunnel, they saw a few more bodies, as well as a volley of bullet holes and some odd cuts in the wall, an examination of which revealed to be marks of some kind of large drill. Several white metal doors filled the corridor, two of which were open. One of these doors had a blood trail running out of it. A bit more concerning was that the second door had been drilled open, and whoever had drilled it had gone back into the base rather than continuing out. As none of the footprints outside had belonged to the boot of anyone who might have done such damage, one had to assume that the entity wielding the drill must be the killer of these personnel, and that he or she had reentered the base.

"We retrace steps first," Jack said after deliberating for a moment, "get a feel for this place, then follow the fucker."

Kyle silently agreed, then via hand gestures directed the formation on how to form, pass the door, and enter the hallway with the blood trail.

The hallway, in contrast to the rather industrial appearance of the external hallway, was all white, spartan, and unmistakably scientific, with directions to various laboratories and warnings on the walls about the dangers of xenopathogens.

"Don't touch anything," Hofnitz commented redundantly.

This upper level of the facility, it turned out, had nothing to offer. It was rather short, with only a few restrooms and maintenance closets, and at the end, a staircase leading to the underground. This staircase they entered, and on the level below, which must have been at least five stories underground, they found something more fruitful.

On this level, the Medusas found the various laboratories which the facility was apparently composed of. Here was where the massacre had clearly taken place. Bodies lined the hallways, and bullet holes and more drill marks marked every wall, and none of the windows into the various labs had survived. Based on the content of the labs, they were running experiments in cybernetics on large specimens, judging by the typical Kruger type cybernetic limbs, autopsy tables, stasis tubes, and all the like.

In one laboratory, upon their entry, the team was greeted by a low, soft sobbing coming from within one cabinet. All paused and glanced at each other, before a decision was made.

"Alright," Jack shouted, "very very slowly open up the cabinet, and keep your hands where I can see them. No tricks."

The cabinet, a low-lying metal affair, swung open from the inside. Crouched in the cabinet was a short, redheaded woman in lab gear, the source of the whimpering.

"Alright," Jack said, "come out very very slowly, with your hands in the air the whole time. I've got a twitchy trigger finger, don't tempt me."

Very slowly, the woman edged out, then got to her feet.

"Don't shoot me," the woman begged, "I don't even work here, I'm here in a university program."

"Who we shoot is our business," Jack said, "but for now we'll take an explanation. What happened here?"

"The new Sentinel model," the young woman explained, "it woke up too soon and went insane. I think the program went wrong."

"Why are you alive and everyone else is dead?" Jack demanded.

"I hid," the young woman said with a helpless shrug, "and everyone else ran."

Plausible enough. It seemed unlikely that this tiny woman could have done all this, and then if she somehow had, why was she now playing the scared victim rather than attacking?

"Alright," Jack said, "now be useful. How do we find the Sentinel?"

"Oh!" the young scientist exclaimed; "I just need to access a terminal, and then I can track it with its serial number."

"There's no one fucking stopping you," Kyle said dryly.

The scientist nodded, then scurried over to a desk at the side of the laboratory, where sat a computer terminal. With a few screens clicked through and a few extra keystrokes, the young scientist pulled up the tracking information on the Sentinel, which was apparently still in the base, in a separate underground compartment which the young scientist called "the mining area."

"He can go invisible, even from thermals," the young scientist cautioned, "you had best be careful."

"No shit," Max muttered.

"Alright," Jack said briskly, "pull up a map of the facility and then upload both it and the Sentinel's tracking info to our wrist computers."

The scientist did both. When the map was pulled up, all leaned over the screen of the terminal, memorizing the map in seconds as they'd all been trained to do. They then turned to go.

"Good luck," Joshie told the scientist; "You'd best get back to hiding."

The Medusas left the laboratory, resuming stalking the halls of the Kruger facility. Once in the hallway, someone flipped open their wrist computer to begin tracking the Sentinel.

"He's on the move," Jack said, "looks like he's headed back for the surface. We can intercept if we hurry."

Thus, the unit rushed back through the facility, their armored footsteps booming through the hallways and staircase as they ran, returning to the silo from which they'd entered. Kyle held up his fist at the doorway, and the others paused at his back as he stepped into the silo, one arm held out to allow his wrist computer to scan for motion.

"Check the tracker," Kyle began, "I'm not seeing-"

In that instant, the sentinel burst from the door to the other side of the facility with an inhuman roar of rage, his gigantic, pointed drill which was attached to his left arm whirring.

"Engage!" Kyle shouted.

The unit charged out, firing a volley of shots and grenades at the Sentinel. A few of these shots landed; most of them did not. With a level of telekinesis Kyle could only dream of, the sentinel instantly deflected almost all the incoming projectiles, returning them to sender in an explosive storm. The Medusas scattered with superhuman speed, and so with no direct hits, there were no injuries, however the explosions of the plasma grenades were quite enough to send a few flying in various directions, including Kyle, who out of the corner of his eye saw the Sentinel visually vanish.

"He's on the move!" Franz shouted, already recovering and firing his sniper rifle; "Shit, I lost him, he hid his thermals!"

"Move your asses and follow him people!" Jack barked, and so all began switching on their wrist computers to track, and

charging out into the wild tan yonder. In their absence, the sandstorm had begun to hit.

Their wrist computers held up in one hand, their guns in another, the Medusas charged from the silo, following a blood trail which ran out of it. This ended almost immediately after passing the base's threshold, and almost immediately after, they saw the effect of the sandstorm.

"The static," someone said, "it's fucking up the signal."

"Spread out," Jack instructed, "he can't have gone very far. If our electronics are fucked, his probably are too."

And so all split up, or at least fanned out, being careful to remain within each other's sight and leave as few blindspots as possible. Walking through the desert, with the howls of the wind and the way the sands glittered pink, gold, and orange when the light caught them, it would have been easy to imagine one had wandered into some desolate afterlife, one which, though beautiful, one would prefer to not spend eternity in.

"Hades!" Klein's voice cut in to the search; "Big metal fuck, ten o'clock!"

All heads snapped to Franz and Klein's position. In their symbiotic way, these two never stood separately from each other. Faster than anyone else could even begin to understand, Klein rattled off his readings concerning windspeed, curvature of the terrain, etcetera, and just as inhumanly fast, Franz made his adjustments to his rifle, scope, and angle from which he aimed. The Medusas raised their own guns and rallied at Franz and Klein's side, their eyes turning to follow the sniper's gaze.

About a quarter mile ahead stood the Sentinel. As Jack had predicted, the static of the sandstorm was causing interference with the Sentinel's electronics, which included his thermal and optic camouflage augments. The Sentinel flickered in and out of visibility, chunks of his body phasing as he moved, as though he

flickered in and out of reality. Franz popped a series of shots at the Sentinel. The Medusas all saw as the Sentinel began to thrash, a geyser of blood spraying from his body, and all heard the roar of rage from the Sentinel's mouth.

"Confirmed direct hit!" Klein shouted triumphantly.

"Charge! Charge! Fucking charge!" Kyle barked, and they charged.

The Sentinel, up to that point, had seemed as though he was running from combat, as he was certainly outmatched. Now cornered, he put up a hell of a fight. His drill whirring once again, the Sentinel raised his arms, telekinetically scattering most of the gunshots aimed at him.

"Two can play at that game Buddy," Kyle thought with a grin, and exerted his own telekinetic power on the Sentinel's drill arm so that said arm bent and cut the Sentinel's leg quite severely, giving the group time to reach him.

As the unit reached the Sentinel, a few sparks flew from his body, no doubt from Cheng's input, which caused another scream of pain, before the Sentinel, his arms waving wildly back and forth, charged ahead to meet the Medusas. In response, the Medusas scattered again, raising their swords and charging individually, lunging and cutting the Sentinel's arms, legs, and back, causing him to fall, then promptly to blow all the Medusas away with another telekinetic pulse to throw his attackers off to the side.

When the Sentinel stood, Kyle took a mental snapshot of him in the second of stillness. The Sentinel, judging by what remained of his head, had once been a very large man with black hair, and very muscular, given what was still remaining of his musculature, which was only his right upper arm, shoulder, neck, the right side of his face, and the right side of his torso from the pectoral down to roughly where the pubic bone must

have been. All the rest of the Sentinel's body was metallized, either by being fully replaced, or by having parts screwed right into his flesh. Both his legs and his entire left arm were metal, as was the left side of his face. On his artificial legs, the Sentinel stood at about nine feet in height, his feet replaced by curved prosthetics. He was totally naked, but his appearance had been so denatured that one wouldn't have ever noticed. Had the Sentinel not gone rogue, he would have "lived," but he'd have hardly been "alive."

Kyle and three others charged towards the Sentinel, swords raised. Their swords came down towards his face, and quick as a flash, the Sentinel blocked their blades, crossing his drill and gatling gun forearms an inch from his face, then flinging his arms apart with another telekinetic pulse to throw his attackers off to the side. The Sentinel, with this last move, left his front side open for attack. Buchner, who stood at an advantageous position, stepped into a blade thrust, driving her Arasaka sword straight through the center of the Sentinel's torso, twisting it, and ripping it out through his side, causing him to roar in pain, and resulting in a gush of blood and hydraulic fluid out the wound.

In a flash, Franz stepped to the Sentinel's back, raised his sniper rifle, and from essentially point blank range, fired a spray of shots at the Sentinel's head, which after about half a dozen shots, at last caused the Sentinel's head to explode, and his body to fall, his life force at last freed from its prison of metal.

When the Sentinel fell, one could see that the inside of his body was quite bizarre; a tangle of organs, wires, hoses, and blood, with a large crystal near the center.

"What happens to the body?" Saito asked.

"The desert will decide," Jack said, looking to the distance, "we need shelter before the storm hits in earnest."

All eyes turned to the horizon, to see that the dust storm was well and truly on her way now, in a cloud so thick that it was penetrated only by those storms of lightning unique to Martian dust storms, in bolts swirling to the ground gradually, weaving temporary dances as complex as any ballet in their flashes. It was mesmerizing, and incredibly dangerous.

The Medusas returned to Prometheus, then flew back to The Eagle's Claw to file their report with Kruger Mercenaries. Their payment was deposited the next day or so, the mission deemed a success.

I would next like to draw the reader's attention to an operation which occured with the Medusas sent into the past, fairly similar to when Kyle, Jack, and company were sent to the Martian year of 1955, to assist Salvador Coronado. It began with a simple message to The Eagle's Claw's home computer, from Emmermann's dial code. The message merely said "Come immediately," followed by a series of coordinates, and a planet name; "Niflheim."

"My Gods," Jack said, "he's bringing us to The Castle."

"The Castle?" Someone asked, no doubt thinking, as Kyle was, that any of Emmermann's homes qualified as a "castle" of one type or another.

"I haven't been there since Terry's day," Jack explained, "but it's his prize. Niflheim is the first full planet he ever led the army in annexing. It's his only real home, he used to say."

"Long ways off too," David said, "going to be a long ass trip."

"I'll go to the hub and tell Camille not to wait up," Joshie shrugged, heading for the door. The others moved up to pack.

"What kind of a place is this Niflheim, anyway?" Max asked as the men were lined up packing their bags.

"It's a paradise if you like snow," Jack said, "his castle is the size of a town. He has his own farming terrace descending under

the house too, and places built into the planet for every kind of food you could ever want. You'll love it, Kid."

Was it Kyle's imagination, or did Jack's voice sound somehow distant? Even a bit… what was it? Jealous? And if so, of what? It was a question Kyle was determined to have answered, once he got Jack alone.

The opportunity came at some point during the transit to Niflheim, which was, as David had predicted, very very long. Several weeks in fact. At some point during the transit, by some fluke or other, Kyle and Jack were the only ones making use of Prometheus's sonic shower.

"So," Kyle asked, being about as subtle as a man like Kyle is capable of being, "what do you think this visit is about?"

Jack's answer was surprisingly forthcoming, and was on the exact subject of Kyle's curiosity.

Jack: "My honest guess? The Old Man is about to show Max the keys of the fucking kingdom. Maybe start his end of life transition. He's ancient."

Kyle stopped, the sonic shower flowing over him, wasting energy.

Kyle: "Keys of the kingdom? You mean Max's inheritance?"

Jack: "Yes. He's waited so long. But with both his succession in place, he's got to be ready to start in on the third generation."

Kyle: "What does that mean?"

Jack: "It'll start off well. He'll give Max weapons and expensive whores. But he'll start assigning him on missions soon enough. Missions to build up the empire, make Max a name. Don't worry, you'll get to go along as his protector."

Kyle: "Do you think we should tell Max?"

A pause.

Jack: "No. I don't."

Kyle: "Jack. Are you jealous?"

Another pause.

Jack: "Fuck no. I wouldn't want all that for anything."

Kyle noticed that Jack didn't make eye contact at this last statement. And so Kyle spent the rest of the trip to Niflheim looking at Max in a slightly different light; as a man who'd someday make King Midas look like a child beggar in Calcutta. It was an odd new light to see him in, one that Kyle couldn't quite process at the time.

In time, the flight came to an end. Niflheim proved to be a planet quite worthy of its name. It was a moderately sized terrestrial planet, perhaps the size of .75 Earths. The equator of the planet was starkly visible, as it was comprised of a single ocean which encircled the planet, like a glassy blue snake eating its own tail, with quite a few branches cutting through the planet, creating about a dozen continents, which all had violently jagged edges. All the visible parts of the continents were blanketed in snow, save for the occasional black speckles of mountaintops or deep valleys. Those parts of the planet not visible were invisible because they were covered in continental clouds of mist, carrying apocalyptic storms of ice and snow. The planet was so bright white and blue that it seemed to give off a supernatural glow, like a white and blue marble given divine life, floating in the endless night of space.

"My Gods," Franz marveled, "isn't she beautiful?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw Joshie crossing himself, and for once, he thought it was almost appropriate, in spirit anyway, though still odd in a location named for a pagan realm. If Kyle himself had been the possessor of breath, it would have been taken away.

When everyone had stared enough, David asked for landing instructions, and Jack told him to lower slowly into lower orbit and wait to be hailed. And so he did, and as Jack had said,

Prometheus was hailed very quickly. Kyle gave her the go ahead to accept the incoming transmission, and as expected, Emmermann's face appeared on the screen.

"Greetings!" Emmermann exclaimed; "You didn't waste time I see."

"I wasn't aware that was an option Sir," Kyle replied, earning a chuckle.

"It wasn't," Emmermann replied, then with something approaching a smile, continued; "is my grandson back there?"

"Yes Sir, I am," Max said, stepping forward. As always, Emmermann seemed to soften ever so slightly at Max's appearance.

"Good man," Emmermann said, "come down, there's some things I'd like to show you."

"I need coordinates Sir," David said from the pilot's seat, and so Emmermann looked down at his desk for a moment, scribbling something on a piece of paper, which he presently held up, showing a set of coordinates on the planet. David gave his thanks, and the transmission was cut, allowing the Medusas to descend to Niflheim's surface.

The surface of Niflheim lived up to the supernatural expectations set by its appearance from orbit. "The Castle" was, it turned out, on the side of the planet which was currently in the night, and with no light pollution to speak of, the sky glittered with stars which seemed to sparkle like diamonds, in all the colors of the rainbow. As Niflheim is towards the core of the galaxy, stars and nebulae are more dense, and more visible from the surface of the planets in the area. In Niflheim's sky hung a pair of moons, one gray and barren, the other shrouded in a thick red haze of an atmosphere, both reflecting an eerie glow.

The terrain was no less remarkable; the entire surface was blanketed in bright white snow, with jagged, seemingly impossible large mountain ranges as far as the eye could see, only

their jet black peaks breaking through the white. In the upper atmosphere, glistening clouds of icy vapor floated to and fro, mysteriously dissolving and firming with no discernible cause.

"The Castle" was also a place befitting its name. It was a monstrous, rectangular stone fortress, with a round tower at each corner, the structure covering several square miles of space. The fortress surrounded a courtyard, which was covered with glass. Through the glass, one could see a botanical garden filled with various alien plants.

As Prometheus approached The Castle, a large hole in the ground opened up. It was very wide and descended quite deep, with shelves of Uberconcrete jutting from the sides at odd intervals. Several of the shelves had ships parked atop, making it clear that this was where one was meant to park. And so David lowered Prometheus to one of the shelves and parked her, and the Medusas offloaded. In the wall from which the landing pad jutted was an open elevator, the inside all white marble, save for the black swastika inlaid into the floor. The Medusas entered, and were conveyed up to a blank hallway, which they followed until they reached a narrow stone staircase, leading up to the proper entryway to The Castle.

The entryway proper was suitably grand. The very dull leadup to it was a perfect illustration of Emmermann's flair for the dramatic. The entryway was all stone, and as was common for Emmermann's homes, the walls bedecked with various taxidermied alien animals. Looming from the wall opposite the front doors was a white, owl like bird with a wingspan of at least 25 feet. From the ceiling hung a gigantic chandelier, with crystals in all the colors of the rainbow, bathing the room in multicolored light and shadow. It was pure spectacle for the eyes. The only appropriate response was to clap. Standing at the edge of

the room, under the owl, Emmermann bowed at the applause, then approached the Medusas.

"My own blades of the Night," Emmermann said, "welcome to my humble home."

Emmermann approached, looking everyone over, and even gave Max an affectionate pat on the shoulder. He did really love his "Ark of the Covenant," in his way.

"Drop your bags, they'll be taken up," Emmermann said with a dismissive shrug, and then turning to the owl said; "Meet Nirmata. She's named after the Draconian princess who led our races to these lands. Now come, it's time for your mission brief."

Everyone dropped their bags and followed Emmermann down one of the many hallways which branched off of the entryway. Through many twists and turns they went, before reaching a set of side, wooden double doors into Emmermann's study, which looked like a much larger version of his usual ones, with a large mahogany desk and walls lined with books. Kyle ran his fingers along the spines on a bookshelf absentmindedly before snapping back to attention at Emmermann's voice.

As per usual, I'll not describe the actual mission briefing. In brief, the Medusas were being sent into the past, quite a long ways, though I'd have no idea how to calculate it on an Earth calendar, so I'll not embarrass myself with the attempt. Regardless of the date, the Medusas were being sent back in time to a colony which, at the time they'd arrive at, was not a colony yet, merely an ice mining outpost on Oberon, a moon of Uranus. Said operation was to eliminate a threat to the ice mining company on Oberon, the company being Fujimori Mining, which was to rise through the ranks in the decades following the help they'd receive.

I encourage the reader not to think too hard about the time and logic paradoxes this briefing presents; there's no answer to

time travel paradoxes, they simply exist. To avoid paradoxes or potential legal issues, Emmermann gave the order that the Medusas were to not take their modern (for the time) weapons, nor their armor; it was on-site acquisition only.

"Go out and enjoy yourselves," Emmermann said at the end of the briefing, "most of you anyway. Max, stay with your Opa, I'd like to talk for a bit. I'll send you my best girl if you do."

"How could I say no to that?" Max asked, and the others left.

"Here we fucking go," Kyle thought, realizing Jack had been right.

Everyone wandered off to explore The Castle. For his part, Kyle made his way to the sprawling botanical gardens beneath the glass at the center of The Castle, in need of nature. He saw many alien plants which impressed him, but most of all he loved some which looked quite similar to spider lilies, but much larger, and bioluminescent, their colors changing in waves. Kyle laid back in the bed of these flowers, staring up at their changing petals.

Gods, Kyle thought, when Emmermann felt like it, he could make paradise just as well as he made hell.

Kyle's reverie was broken by footsteps coming up the garden path. He stood, brushing the dirt off his jacket, and was faced with Viktoria Romanov, Emmermann's oldest daughter. Kyle stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

"Miss Romanov," Kyle began, "I'm-"

"Fleet Captain Romanov," Viktoria corrected, and so Kyle saluted, which she returned.

"What brings you to Niflheim?" Kyle asked as though he were an airport taxi driver.

"I came here to meet my successor," Viktoria said with an eye roll, "the man usurping my own children. Not that any of us care."

Kyle stiffened.

Kyle: "That would be my son. Max Bronsley."

Viktoria: "I remember you, Captain Dellschau. I do believe he's not your son, as you're a synthetic. He's your charge, while you're under my father's ownership. We all had someone like you growing up."

Kyle: "I raised him. Taught him to survive and be a man, and loved him more than I could imagine. Is that not a father?"

"If you wish," Viktoria shrugged, "I can't say my father would agree. Nor does it matter what you've done in the end. At any rate, have you seen our tree?"

Viktoria continued up the path, heading to the center of the botanical garden. In the center stood a megalithic tree, similar in structure to a mangrove, though lacking the vines. The trunk was at least 30 feet in diameter, and the bark smooth and tan. The tree was easily 100 feet tall, the branches blossoming from the trunk in the same fashion as a head of broccoli. The leaves were like small, feathery oak leaves. The most intriguing feature was the tassels; tiny white tassels, which glowed blue and flickered on the inside.

When one stood completely still, one heard a sound.

"Is the tree... singing?" Kyle asked, his ears attuning to the faint tune which elevated from the tree. It reminded him of an ocarina, but more ethereal. He also noticed his mood lifting just being nearby.

"Yes," Viktoria said, also beginning to smile in spite of herself, "this is a Soulsinger Tree. The ancient people of Cassiopeia created them before they were killed off."

"What is that tune?" Kyle asked, allowing said tune to bathe his brain, making him feel attuned and yet at peace.

"That's the planet," Viktoria said, then at Kyle's no doubt bewildered stare, continued; "When a Soulsinger is planted, he

attunes to the soul of the planet. They're all male apparently. He latches on, and sings the mood the planet is in. This is a good tune, she must be happy today. You should hear a sad one."

Viktoria reached up and plucked a tassel from the tree.

"What the fuck?" Kyle said indignantly.

"It's perfectly alright," Viktoria said, holding out her hand with the tassel, which continued to flicker and give off its piece of the tune; "The tassels all share a psychic link to their father. No matter how far they go, they sing their father's tune, until at last the father dies."

That sounded suspiciously familiar to Kyle, but he of course didn't say anything. Viktoria pocketed the tassel and set off again, with another snide remark about meeting "the usurper." Kyle realized he'd have to keep an eye on her, though he didn't think she truly cared at this point. Still, Kyle left, wandering for quite a while through the halls until he happened to find one of Emmermann's signature scantily clad maids. His mind turning carnal, he flagged her down and asked her to show him to his room, which she did, leading him to one of the usual galleries of bedrooms with the names of guests tacked onto the doors.

"Thank you for showing me," Kyle said, as he opened the door, then with a grin added; "Would you care to help me get ready for bed?"

Kyle spent several hours with the maid "helping him get ready for bed," and then she scurried off. Kyle bathed in the massive bathroom he'd been afforded, and then slept. Clearly, the Medusas had arrived past dinner time, and if he was needed, he'd be fetched.

Kyle wasn't needed, it turned out. When his eyes opened next, sunlight was pouring in through his bedroom's window. He hadn't closed the curtains, but no matter. Kyle was glad to be woken up a bit early, as he wanted to talk to Max, and so after

dressing, went to do just that. He was rather surprised when Max actually came and opened his door after the first knock. Max normally hibernated as much as possible.

"What's up, Dad?" Max asked as he moved to his closet, beginning to repack his bag.

"Max," Kyle asked thoughtfully, "how do you think of me?"

"Well," Max said, "you can be a bit of an asshole if I don't keep you in check, but on the whole I'd rather not be without you."

Kyle smiled.

"What I meant is," Kyle persisted, "do you think of me as your Dad?"

"What? Of course I do," Max said, "you raised me, gave me food and shelter, taught me how to shoot guns and pick up girls. What else would you be but my Dad. Why, did Aunt Viktoria get to you?"

"Yes," Kyle admitted sheepishly, "how is she your aunt anyway?"

"I have no fucking idea," Max chuckled, "except she must be one of my parents siblings. The Old Man hasn't ever explained, and I genuinely think she's clueless. He mostly kept reiterating that for now, I'm a soldier with nothing, just like he was when he got his first taste of empire."

"And that you'll inherit this house one day," Kyle muttered, mostly to himself.

"Yes," Max said, "not that I give a fuck. But at least I got a free hooker, and he's leaving me in charge of the mission. We ship out after breakfast."

"Odin fucking spare us all," Kyle quipped. Max snickered.

As I've described so many of Emmermann's breakfasts before, I'll spare the reader the repetition, as I will of the loading of Prometheus. All I'll mention is that Emmermann gave each of the Medusas a black and white electronic wristband reading

"Merchant Visitor" in several languages, which he said would give them access to the ice mining site, and he also gave them the name of Saburo Fujimori, whom they were to seek out.

"He's been told to expect you," Emmermann said with a worrying wink.

The Medusas had also been given the instructions to lock up their guns and armor, to avoid causing any time paradoxes. Their Arasaka swords were approved, having already been invented in the time period they were sent to. In replacement of their guns, Emmermann gave them rifles, whose bullets all had little windows on the side showing they were filled with a red liquid.

"Blood coagulant," Emmermann said, "very effective against the enemy."

Of course, in the same old cryptic fashion, who "the enemy" was still wasn't explained. Emmermann did promise that the Medusas would be invited back to Niflheim, and The Castle, for a more proper stay at some point.

The trip back to the solar system was, of course, just as long in reverse. In the end it would turn out that this mission would feel like a bunch of pointless travel, but I must pace myself.

Prometheus, at long long last, arrived in the orbit of Oberon, rather shadowed by Uranus. Oberon looked not too much different from Niflheim, on a superficial level, as it was also white and icy. But it lacked Niflheim's eerie light, its glistening clouds, its titanic, Jormungandr-like equatorial ocean, and its ethereal spark of indefinable life. No one marveled at the sight of Oberon, and Joshie didn't cross himself; Kyle simply gave the order, and David began lowering Prometheus.

The site of the Fujimori Mining site was almost sad; an ocean of blast holes on the surface, haphazardly blown to allow massive tunnel boring machines to penetrate into the moon.

Complicated scaffolding rigs went down into the resulting abyss, at least until those blast holes which had been lucky enough to hit on ice, rather than rock. Other than this, the only feature was a monstrous, round, domed building of what appeared to be cast iron, one small side of which had a force field through which one could enter. Prometheus was hailed in Japanese, and after an order to power down cannons, permission to enter the giant building was granted.

The inside of the building, at least the bottom level, was just as soulless and spartan as the outside had been; just an Uber-concrete circular room, with the building's single circular wall all around, a single metal staircase leading to the upper levels of the building.

“I can see why they have enemies,” Kovac commented.

“Five more minutes and I’m ready to blow up this shithole,” Joshie agreed.

The Medusas offloaded. A worker in a white spacesuit caught them as they did so, and after a glance at their “Merchant Visitor” wristbands, said that they should proceed to the top level of what the miners sarcastically called, “The Iron Temple,” to see the one whom they sarcastically called “The General.”

Saburo Fujimori, it turned out, was a cranky man of upper middle age who sat in a circular office at the top of the building, which was just layer upon layer of Uberconcrete and iron. Fujimori said that if the Medusas wished to find out what his problem was, and attempt to deal with it, they were welcome to find suits downstairs and head out onto the ice to find out. When pressed for details, he let slip the term “ice giants,” but couldn’t seem to explain much past that.

“It’s the damndest thing,” Fujimori said at one point; “my future self and Admiral Emmermann called me, told me to

expect you. But in the future, I'm younger than now. How the fuck is that possible?"

"I'm sure you'll find out," Jack said cautiously, no doubt watching for paradoxes.

"He doesn't even know about age tech?" Kovac said incredulously back in the hall.

All walked dutifully back down the stairs, with Max in front, as mission leader. On one level of "The Iron Temple," the Medusas found a row of the same white spacesuits the other workers wore. These they slipped into, then returned to Prometheus for their guns, then out onto the ice to search for whatever was the problem they'd been sent to deal with. They noticed they didn't see many workers in the facility, and these workers didn't speak to them. Nor, it turned out, did they see many on the ice. It seemed that Fujimori Mining had a labor shortage.

Saburo "The General" Fujimori, whatever his faults, had been right about the ease of finding the "ice giants." The Medusas had decided to walk towards the more distant worksites. As they walked among a few ridges of ice, they heard a sound; the sound of a gigantic entity breathing. All eyes snapped to see the source.

Emerging, or rather standing from a prone position, was what most on modern Earth would refer to as a Yeti. With thick white fur that glistened like ice, providing nearly flawless camouflage, the beast drew to its full height, which was easily 100 feet.

"That's an ice giant if I've ever seen one," Buchner remarked.

"A big fucking one," Joshie agreed.

"Fire!" Max shouted.

At the sound of Max's shout, the yeti turned solidly in the unit's direction. With a roar that would have shaken skyscrapers, the yeti charged, ice cracking beneath its feet. For

such a huge animal, it ran very fast. But then, in gravity this light, such a creature wasn't remotely as heavy as it would have been on Earth.

For a minute, the hail of gunfire which the yeti received seemed comically pointless. Even if these bullets, which were quite high velocity, could get through the yeti's fur, they couldn't possibly break the skin, which must be feet thick. It appeared pointless, until someone shot the yeti's eye. When this was done, the yeti stopped in its tracks, reaching up for its face. The injured eye became bloodshot, and then promptly exploded causing an outpouring of very heavily clotted blood from the hole where once the yeti's eye had been, and at last it fell forward, dead.

"The blood coagulant," Hofnitz remarked, "it must have worked. These things must have such high blood pressure that clotting causes a vessel to burst. Lucky someone hit near the brain."

More thudding was heard in the distance, and on the horizon came at least another three yetis.

"I want to see whether they're headed for us or the corpse," Max said, "so fall back. If they start getting close, aim for their eyes."

To Kyle's mind it didn't much matter what these things behavior was, or why. But Max was the leader on this mission, and so he must be listened to.

The yetis' behavior was rather frightening to see; as Max had hypothesized, the yetis were headed for the corpse of their fallen compatriot. This became a disturbing sight when the yetis began ripping apart and devouring the one just killed.

"Alright, fire at will, aim for the eyes only," Max ordered, his voice sounding faintly disgusted.

The three offending yetis never had a chance to stand up from their position before they too received the blood coagulant to the eyes and were killed. They posed a true threat only for the time period, whatever that may have been. A modern German squad, or a strong force field, would have made short work of them.

“Alright,” Max said after a few minutes had passed and no more yetis had come, “let’s go tell Fujimori our progress. See what he wishes.”

It’s hard to define if Fujimori-san was truly impressed, or just dumbfounded. Either way, he was grateful enough to allow the Medusas to stay.

“How long?” Max asked.

“About three Uranian weeks,” Fujimori shrugged; “it’s all hands on deck right now. The water riots on Luna are ramping up. My men have to produce 300 tons of ice to keep things calm. And the check coming in from the Lunar leadership doesn’t hurt.”

A pause.

“We have a deal,” Max said, extending his hand; “we keep your men alive until you have filled your ice quota. What do we do for entertainment around here.”

“Fuck all!” Fujimori laughed; “This isn’t a place to be entertained. It’s a place to work.”

“No wonder your men hate you,” Max chuckled. Kyle smiled to himself at his son’s characteristic brashness.

And so it went. For the next three Uranian weeks, the Medusas held off the yeti threat from assaulting the Fujimori Mining site. It wasn’t the most difficult task they’d ever known, but it was a job they were grateful for. It represented their new era, moving away from Mars and becoming an army for hire that everyone wanted, but no one seemed to truly know.

At one point, the yetis, which were clearly not stupid creatures, began to try a new tactic; lying prone on the ice and somehow gliding over it on their own power, perhaps with a slight levitation ability. This made them much more difficult to see. Difficult, but not impossible, and a few bullets or an angry shout and a charge never ceased to stop them raising their heads, making their all important weak spots ready to be hit.

At one point, Max asked permission from Fujimori to use Prometheus's cannons. This request was refused; Fujimori wanted no more damage done to the ice than was strictly necessary.

By the end of the requisite three Uranian weeks, the yetis had become few and far between. None disturbed the process at all when the hauling ship came to take the 300 tons of ice. The hauling ship looked like a monster obelisk, at least a mile long, laid on its side. Its back end was opened, and the ice, in chunks of all shapes and sizes and coated in some kind of artificial sawdust, were loaded into the ship and flown off to Luna to assuage the water riots.

When at last their task was completed, the Medusas were very relieved to leave Oberon. Under Emmermann's direction, it was decided they'd best return to Fort Worden, and operate out of there for the next little while, as they hadn't been back there in months.

Back at Fort Worden, Kyle and Jack received a notification from First United Bank of Cydonia; they'd received a very handsome payment from Fujimori Mining. Another satisfied client for the Medusas; another company in Emmermann's pocket.

***Author's note. I feel an odd need to apologize to the reader for my admittedly sparse descriptions of the Fujimori facility and what occured there, aside from the yeti war. In truth, that*

*part of these particular memories rather bores me such that I didn't take much note as I was examining them.***

Chapter 21

Before describing one mission which decidedly changed Kyle's life, I feel I must once again describe a few smaller missions which Kyle carried out, along with a few old friends, as part of his still extant work contract with Project Phoenix. I'll describe the first one thus.

Kyle was in the apartment with Max. It felt oddly empty now, without Harune's presence, and yet it had drawn them closer than they'd been since Max was a boy. It was a busy time at Fort Worden, for all but the contractors, which included the Medusas, and Jimmy had tightened security, so there wasn't much way to amuse one's self other than watch one's television, read books, wander in the woods, or go to the brothel, the last of which had raised their prices out of Kyle's price range. And so Kyle and Max sat in their apartment, watched whatever bootleg films they could find, and read books. It was a relief when Kyle got a notification on his glass pad, ordering him to report for duty. Grabbing his guns, he set off for the "situation room."

In the "situation room," Kyle met three familiar faces; Sondra Saunders-Roth, Alexander Stephens McGill, and Daniel O'Brien. Kyle saluted McGill, smiled at Danny, and nodded as cordially as he could manage at Sondra. They still hadn't made up after Jason's disappearance, and frankly, Kyle wasn't inclined to forgive, or rather, he didn't feel that it was his right, as he wasn't the victim; Jason was. But for the sake of the mission, he forced civility to the surface, and stepped to the holographic mapping table.

“Howdy,” McGill said in his good natured Carolina drawl, “you’re late to the party Kraut.”

“Just start the briefing cow fucker,” Kyle shot back, earning a laugh. McGill had a sense of humor, which was a large part of why Kyle respected him so.

“You’ve all worked together before?” McGill asked; “With success?”

“We have,” Danny confirmed, cutting off Sondra, who had opened her mouth.

“Good, good,” McGill said, and switched on the holographic table; “I’d like you to retrieve-“

A general groan went up at the word “retrieve.” No matter their differences, all Project Phoenix assets grew tired of artifact retrieval sooner or later. With an evil chuckle, McGill continued the briefing. This artifact retrieval mission at least had an element of novelty, as the trio would get to use another artifact on the trip, to facilitate opening a gate at a specific soft spot, which was only accessible at one very specific set of coordinates, on one very specific date, in Yellowstone National Park, in 1942.

“Now you head for the armory,” McGill said, “no time to waste.”

With that, Kyle, Danny, and Sondra left the “situation room,” to the armory. Under the new system, the armory also distributed outfits, along with weapons, at the statement of a mission number. The guns issued here were nothing more than a Browning A5 and a .357 Magnum each, thankfully at least with high velocity shells, with quite a few boxes of replacements in their bags. They’d also all been given partial smartsuits, the sleeves and legs cut short enough such that they’d not show. Their issued clothes were of the time period of course, and looked like the clothes of anyone on a hunting trip, which is technically illegal within most American national parks, but in

1942, there were bigger concerns than a few people wanting a little more meat than what their rations provided. Sondra was also given a camera, and orders to photograph "key points" on the mission.

With their weapons and the artifact, as well as a sextant and a few other tools in their rucksacks, Kyle, Danny, and Sondra left.

"Will you be civil?" Danny asked Kyle telepathically as they headed for the portal.

"That depends on her behavior," Kyle replied back coolly.

The portal did indeed drop the trio off within Yellowstone National Park; it did not, however, drop them off anywhere near the target. A look at the sextant showed that they had miles to walk, and a look at their watches showed they would have to build shelter and spend the night, as the allotted window was over 24 hours away.

"Always another fucking test," Sondra grumbled, in her usual way.

"Fuckin relax," Danny said, "when else would you get this scenery?"

Sondra looked out at the scenery, which was indeed magnificent. And so naturally, Sondra turned and spat into it. And so Kyle leveled the greatest "fuck you" he could think of; he laughed. A deep, hearty, full throated, and entirely sincere laugh. A trick he'd learned a long time previously was that the best way to stop a temper tantrum is to not take it even remotely seriously. And it worked; after a moment, all Sondra could do was glare through gritted teeth, which only made Kyle laugh again. He was still wiping tears from his eyes before they set off again on the trail, Sondra snapping a few pictures while Danny, the holder of the sextant, gave out directions.

The trio marched through the woods for a good ways, at one point seeing Old Faithful. At another point, on one of the main

trails overlooking one of the main vistas, the trio came across a man; of medium build, with a thick black beard, carrying a bewildering array of cameras and lenses, including a Graflex with all the trimmings. No doubt salivating, Sondra ran ahead of Kyle and Danny to the man, and began speaking to him.

"The fuck you think that's about?" Danny asked.

"No idea," Kyle shrugged, "maybe she'll get some dick calm down."

Kyle was right, though the cause was a bit different than the one he proposed, and decidedly quicker and easier. A mere moment after talking to the photographer, Sondra turned around, now with a smile on her face, and waved the man over. Not yet seeing what was happening, and outranked anyway, they bounded over.

"Hello," the bearded photographer said cordially, shaking Kyle and Danny's hands; "the young lady has requested I take your photograph together."

"Did she now?" Kyle asked.

"I don't-" Kyle began.

"Perfect!" The man exclaimed; "Line up please. Put the mountains at your back."

And so they did. For the first time, and most likely the last, Kyle saw Sondra beaming. And so for the spirit of the moment, Kyle smiled too, as did Danny, and the photo was snapped.

"Very good," the man approved, "now, I must be on my way. I'll be on the move for a while, but you may mail the Department of the Interior or the National Park Service for a print in a few months. They'll have my forward address."

"Thank you," Kyle said, "and who should we address the request to?"

"Adams," the photographer said, "but if we meet again, you may call me Ansel. Good day, Ma'am, Sirs."

And with a tip of his hat, the photographer set off, in the opposite direction of where the assets headed, only Sondra at the time having any notion of the significance of the mysterious wild man of the mountain who had just photographed them.

Kyle, Danny, and Sondra reached the site of the gate with well over 12 hours to spare, and as they were quite now remote, hunted their dinner by moonlight and roasted it over a fire. Without a guitar or a general good mood, this process was quite boring, but Kyle determinedly stayed cheerful, having put himself quite seriously to following through on Tsurabaya's last request of "always be yourself and be happy."

Morning came, and so did the window for the mission, which was only a couple of hours on an Earth clock, perhaps longer or shorter on the planet of target, given time dilation was clearly an important factor here. The artifact to open the gate looked like a rather complicated safe dial or kitchen timer, with the digits being characters in the Draconian Alphabet. A series of 15 was dialed into the device, as the trio of Kyle, Danny, and Sondra stood on the set spot, and in front of them, a gate opened.

"Fall behind me, triangle formation," Kyle said, switching to battalion leader mode; "keep those guns ready. Make those shots count, we only have so many. Move fast, let's get through and the gate closed before we have a breach."

In front, Kyle stepped through the royal blue, ovular gate which shimmered just before him. He was hit, as always, with that instantaneous flash of feelings of exiting one's body and then being shoved straight back into it which always results when one walks through a gate. No matter how fast the feeling, no matter how often one undergoes the process, one never gets used to the feeling, and always feels disorientated for a few seconds. Thus, Kyle took a moment to see that he and the others were in what was clearly the hive of a large insect species, the

walls lined in a ribcage-like pattern with various bits of debris, tacked on with spit or some kind of jelly. A glance to his back showed Kyle that Sondra and Danny had successfully made it through the gate as well, and with a few clicks on the dial, the gate closed.

With Kyle's instruction, the group moved forward, towards a light they could see down a tunnel. Said light obscured the view, thus that it was several seconds before the trio saw the threat; huge, dark green stick bugs. With a scream, a horde of the bugs charged. But they didn't stand a chance against high velocity buckshot rounds through an enhanced Browning A5, much less a punch from an ultra soldier. The horde was gone in two minutes.

Kyle, Danny, and Sondra emerged past the tunnel, directly into the nest, which was in a large cavern, a hole in the ceiling giving the nest light from a white dwarf light. Standing at at least 30 feet in height, and at least 150 feet long, was the queen. Her body and legs were lime green, with red spikes running down her legs. She was seemingly defenseless however, as she was attached to a red and yellow striped ovipositor. Between her feet were various objects, perhaps given as offerings.

Danny made eye contact with the queen and pointed with his gun to the objects between her legs, which included the large, gold tube with carvings in various alien languages which the trio had come for. The queen seemed to understand. The hordes of drones all stayed still, some even making way as Kyle, Danny, and Sondra approached, taking the object, their guns trained at the Queen's head to show threat.

"Jesus," Danny said, lifting the tube, "must weigh a quarter ton. What is this?"

"Don't know, don't fucking care," Kyle said, "let's get the fuck out before they decide they want revenge on their comrades."

The coordinates for Earth were dialed on the little gate device, and the trio returned to the spot they'd stepped through just a few minutes earlier, back in Yellowstone National Park. Sondra pulled a glass pad from her rucksack and messaged Fort Worden. A portal was opened, and they returned, a very brief and successful mission.

I'll next very briefly touch on another retrieval mission which the same trio participated in. This was one quite similar, superficially, to that mission I relayed in Volume 2, chapter 13, which involved retrieving an object from one who was to be assassinated in a hotel. These missions may have been connected, as in the briefing, it was stated that Kyle and Danny were being sent to accompany Sondra on the chance that she "once again had a goal attempt to be foiled by an enhanced person."

This mission was slightly unique for one reason; it occured in Warsaw, in late July, 1939, barely a month before the outbreak of war. As time travelers, Kyle, Sondra, and Danny of course knew this, even if it wasn't mentioned in the brief.

The scene of Warsaw on the brink was not what one might expect. No flags of war hung out, the stores were full as ever, no warnings blared from the radios, no one was boarding up their windows; life was exactly as it always had been. Kyle didn't much like the constant and very visible Jewish presence of course, but still, it was strange to think of how their life would be upset so soon.

Kyle, Danny, and Sondra, in period appropriate clothing of course, boarded a tram, setting off for their hotel, the Hotel Polonia Palace.

"My God," Sondra said, a far off, almost blighted look in her eyes as she stared out of the tram.

"What?" Danny asked, shifting to follow her gaze.

“I just realized,” Sondra explained, not looking up, “that in a few years from this visit, everyone we’re looking at is going to be dead. And they don’t know shit about it.”

Even as he supported the aggressor side, Kyle did feel a chill down his spine at these words.

The trio reached the Hotel Polonia Palace, and offloaded, then entered the hotel, bypassing the front desk. The foyer was fairly busy, in that odd witching hour which all good hotels face daily, when all last night’s guests are dallying as they wait for their cabs, whilst their replacements arrive for an early glimpse before check in, and so no one paid them any attention as they walked right to one of the staircases leading up into the hotel.

The three had been given a room number, and instructions; knock on the door, kill whoever answered with the silenced gun they’d been given, (this being one of the truly silent models, not Hollywood silent) and then search the room, bringing with them any blueprints they found. They weren’t to touch any other papers.

As it turned out, the person who answered the door was a slight blonde woman of about 40. If she was enhanced, she was no match for several rounds of high velocity, caseless ammunition to the chest and head. Her room was very quickly and very thoroughly searched.

Kyle specifically didn’t pay much attention to the blueprints they found, and then ultimately returned to Fort Worden, and looking back on the memory, I myself can’t interpret much, as I’m not an engineer. I can, however, say that the blueprints looked to be for a very bulky cigar shaped spacecraft, similar to the “Andromeda Gerat” spoken of in certain documents of the era, and in testimonies, though this model looked an awfully lot more primitive.

As with all the retrieval missions Kyle was sent on in this period, the Warsaw op was successful.

Author's note. Quite a brief chapter, I'm aware, serving mostly to give context to a pair of stories which are fairly well known to those who have watched my interviews. The Hotel Polonia Palace is very possible to visit, at time of writing. I've had an odd amount of difficulty determining its name in 1939, which may have been different.

Chapter 22

As this volume, and the epoch which it encapsulates, begin to draw to a close, I must draw attention to a mission which the Medusas carried out which would, in the end, change Kyle a good deal, in mind, body, and soul. I must issue a very strong trigger warning to my audience. And so without further ado, I'll continue with it.

This mission began, as so often, within the walls of The Glass Hub. Kyle was sat at the bar, inspecting the ladies as they came by, trying to make up his mind which one he'd have for the night, when Camille approached him.

"We have a potential client," Camille said, "asked to see people who can help him fix a problem off-world."

Kyle drained his whiskey and for the moment quashed his urges towards the fairer sex.

Kyle: "Where have you put him?"

Camille: "Upstairs. He's in a red jacket. I've already sent Ares up."

Kyle: "Thank you, Aphrodite."

Kyle got off the stool he'd sat on and strode up the stairs, quickly spotting the man in the red motorcycle jacket immediately, and likewise immediately recognizing him; the man was Roberto "Tío Bobby" Fernandes, sitting with his jacket quite open so that his guns were very visible, or at least the holsters were, as he'd of course been required to leave his actual weapons at the door. With a smile, Kyle approached, sitting alongside Jack opposite Fernandes at the little round table.

“Kyle!” Fernandes exclaimed; “How have you been? Still hanging around in that metal, I see.”

“Ferrocarbon alloy, as it happens,” Kyle quipped, “so what brings you here, pendejo?”

“Well for starters,” Fernandes said, switching to German, though he maintained his Colombian accent; “I am not Bobby.”

A pause.

“Who are you then?” Kyle asked, sounding measured as his hand moved surreptitiously to his sidearm, which he then tilted forward in its holster, so that it was aimed directly at Fernandes, or whomever this character might be. Kyle also sent up a telepathic signal to Max and Cheng, both of whom he knew for certain were in the bar that night.

“I’m your benefactor,” the man in Fernandes’s body said; “I’m Emmermann.”

“Bullshit,” Jack laughed, “nice try, Bobby.”

At these words, “Fernandes” reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a photograph, which he set on the table. This photograph showed Jack in childhood at a gun range. On the back were written the words; “Jack, New Atlantis, 906.” Jack gulped and handed the photo back.

“I apologize Father,” Jack said, sounding almost meek.

“Alright,” Kyle said, “to put it bluntly Sir; what the fuck is this about?”

“Well, it is nice to have a body with a bit of stamina, don’t you think?” Emmermann said with a wink, then entered the theatrical explanation mode he was so fond of, before continuing; “And to prove a point for the proposal I’m making.”

With this, Emmermann reached under his seat, pulling out a leather rucksack, out of which he in turn pulled a file, which he opened and took out a large photo that he laid on the table. Kyle and Jack leaned forward to take a look. By this point, Cheng and

Max had reached them, and stood nearby on full alert. Kyle moved his fingers in the "stand down" gesture.

"Ayoko Daishono," Jack observed, visibly stiffening, "what about her?"

"Well," Emmermann said, "you all owe me several favors, as you know. How would you like to do me a favor that would get you real revenge on the killer of your compatriot?"

"Go on," Jack said cautiously. And so Emmermann did.

From the file, Emmermann pulled another photograph, this one of a large blonde German man, labeled as "Gunther Haverbeck."

"This is also Ayoko Daishono," Emmermann said.

At this point, Emmermann explained to Kyle and Jack about a practice known as "Dolling." And so I'll describe it for the reader.

In the Breakaway, a society which fits the definition of "biopunk" and "nanopunk" very well, the practice of "Dolling" is very simple. In it, a person uploads their consciousness into another body (referred to as a "doll," as it's viewed culturally as a plaything) which may be operated remotely, or it may be set free with orders and enough awareness to carry out its own will altogether, then the consciousness recalled to the original body. Originally, only a clone could be used, as a soul is often reluctant to enter the body of another ethnicity, however since the invention of the Soul Byte, it's possible to insert the soul into any body on the Arasaka net, or to copy one's soul byte and insert it into any body one has on hand. This practice is very expensive, and available only to the elite of the Breakaway, and is occasionally used by a few military factions.

"Alright," Jack said once Emmermann had finished his explanation, "but even if this fellow is her doll, how does that help us?"

“Isn’t it obvious?” Emmermann said, then took a long sip of his highball before continuing; “You go in, kill the doll, find the manufactory plant on the planet, take them down. We’re done being pussies; it’s time for the rivers to run red with Daishono blood!”

Kyle may have tried to remain professional, but he no doubt was grinning like a schoolboy at this last statement. Max was even less restrained, and leaned in to the table.

Max: “Opa, when do we fucking start?”

Emmermann: “That’s the spirit Boy. Take a seat, and I’ll tell you.”

With this, Emmermann pulled another large photograph from the file, this one of a small Chinese man, by the name of Sung. This man, apparently, was Haverbeck/Daishono’s head of security, and was to be the first likely target of the Medusas, who were to abduct and interrogate Sung, and from there, attack the Daishono plants. It wasn’t flawless, but with the element of surprise, the Medusas were almost sure to be successful, and it would mean a significant power shift if so.

“Before you go,” Max said, “does Bobby know you’re in his body?”

“Of course,” Emmermann laughed, “and furthermore, he’s paying for this mission. It was his idea.”

“How much?” Kyle asked.

“Eight million Bundesmarks. Each. Plus carte blanche with all his stock, for life,” Emmermann said, then in the silence added; “he wants revenge on the Queen Bitch for what she did to him.”

The only sound anyone could manage was a long, low whistle from Jack.

“Quite so,” Emmermann said, “now Max, who's your favorite girl here? I haven’t felt this eager since I was your age!”

Max and Emmermann in the Fernandes "doll" stood, and Cheng wandered off, leaving behind only Kyle and Jack.

"Jack," Kyle said, "if we could survive this, would he pay that much? That would be enough for a second bar, and Gods knows what else!"

"I don't know what he'd do," Jack said, "but we can't pass up this opportunity. I'll go see Buchner, start taking stock."

"I'll start looking at this colony," Kyle said, already flipping open his wrist computer, and looking at information on Neu Koln, the colony in question.

For the next several days, the Medusas simply sat around and planned. They examined every street in Neu Koln on the home screen, and every piece of information on the target. Haverbeck had a cylindrical blue glass office building, near the center of town, which he never left. Reaching Haverbeck (or whomever he might be) would have to wait. No, first Sung must be tracked, his movements noted, and his abduction carried out flawlessly, in order to get the relevant pre-strike information. When four days had passed, the scanning had become redundant.

"Right," Kyle said at last on the 5th morning, "we had best move soon."

"The Old Man sent a message last night," Jack said, "we have an unlimited weapons clearance."

"Better move along then," David said, "it's a long flight."

"How long?" Hofnitz asked.

"170 hours," David said, "and if we left now, we'd get there in the early evening."

"We best not keep the enemy waiting then," Jack said briskly, "start loading Prometheus and let's get going."

As they'd become accustomed to by now, the Medusas packed in no more than two minutes, and with their rucksacks and as many weapons as each of them could possibly carry on their

backs, they boarded Prometheus and headed for Neu Koln. Kyle wished he had Harune around to confirm or deny his foreboding feelings; the others may have had them as well, but without Harune's confirmation, Kyle still couldn't trust himself.

As David had predicted, the trip was very long. Neu Koln sat on a planet orbiting an orange star somewhere much outside of the Draco Empire's territory, on the edges of what the Breakaway considers "home territory." If the star system has a name, I can't personally remember it, and it likely hasn't been found by any of the main space agencies, as an orange K-type star this far into "deep space" is extremely difficult to spot even with the most advanced of today's mainstream space exploration tools.

Neu Koln itself proved much as dull as the satellite images had made it out to be. It was a very large, very clean, and very boring city made seemingly entirely of brutalist buildings of Uberconcrete and glass, with hardly any greenery, or indeed coloration at all. And the population was equally cold; no one so much as nodded at each other when passing on the street. Even to Kyle's mind, it was entirely too Germanic, in thorough need of some Latin seediness or Japanese beauty. But, the Medusas weren't in town to be architecture critics. No, they'd come to Neu Koln for a job, and a job they'd do.

"Welcome to Neu Koln," one of the usual customs inspectors said, "I hope you have a license for all those weapons."

Said security officer audibly gulped when he was shown the Medusas unlimited weapons allowance license.

"Good luck," was all the officer said after, no doubt realizing that the Medusas must be in town to clean up a major problem of some kind.

"Thank you," Max replied, "not that we need it."

"Right then," Kyle said once they'd been left alone in Prometheus once again, "you know the drill by now; hotel,

freshen up, dinner, sleep, get our bearings and start on the target in the morning."

"We've been put up in The Blue Hanelian," Jack said, reading from his wrist computer, "on Kaiser Wilhelmstraße."

"I hope it's not one of the usual shitholes," Joshie said.

One advantage of Neu Koln, as it turned out, is that it happens to be one of the few colonies in which ground based personal cars are the norm, rather than public transit and the occasional shuttles for the wealthy. Much as they added to the general ugliness of the colony, the cars made an abduction a good deal easier, at least in theory. Thus, the first thing the Medusas did was rent several cars at the office at the edge of the gigantic concrete landing pad which made up the Neu Koln spaceport.

The Blue Hanelian was, as it turned out, most certainly not "one of the usual shitholes," as Joshie had so eloquently put it. While it was yet another Uberconcrete building, the architects had put a touch of effort into it, accenting the outside window frames and the doors, and besides, it had a direct view of Haverbeck's office building, being right across the street.

The inside of The Blue Hanelian was very impressive indeed. The entry hallway was all black marble, with a single stark contrast; near the ceiling, jutting out from the walls on either side, were planters, also of black marble, and from said planters hung long tangles of vines, covered thickly in tiny, bioluminescent, cornflower blue flowers; the blue Hanelians from which the hotel got its name.

The foyer of the hotel was also black marble, with gold art deco lighting. It turned out that each of the Medusas had been given his or her own room, price undisclosed. Kyle had to endure the humiliation of having his serial number scanned at the

hotel's front desk, but otherwise, the check in process was painless and quick, and so the Medusas were able to settle into their rooms, then to find their own food and entertainment for the evening. Kyle did his usual routine of ordering his dinner from the hotel menu, then going to the hotel bar and bringing a woman up with him for a few hours before bathing and settling into a position in which he could watch all ways in and out of the room. For such a high risk mission, Kyle wasn't going to sleep.

Morning came, and so mission planning must commence, now that they were all on the scene, and so to one of the hotel rooms they went. It was decided that the first stage, once again, was to watch and wait. Hofnitz's room, of them all, was found to be the one with the best views of the offices in the building owned by Haverbeck/Daishono.

If the reader feels I am perhaps speeding through the details of this early part of the mission, this is because I am. Due to an upcoming incident, this all would soon seem rather unimportant, at least for the time. The trouble began on the third day.

On this second day, the Medusas had spotted Sung, Haverbeck's head of security. That such a small boned man could be a corporate head of security looked unlikely, which meant he must be enhanced, which had Jack give the caution to the Medusas to follow him both at a distance and individually, to reduce the chance of being spotted as much as possible. And so, on the morning of the third day, the Medusas distributed to various streetcorners to spot Sung's car on the reapproach to work, to begin the process of slowly and methodically retracing his route to and from his work, where he frequented, etcetera, to find the best possible abduction point for the operation. The Medusas were connected by comms units.

The trouble happened when Kyle was standing on his street corner, or rather just off of it, on a rather empty little side street, when an exchange began on the comms.

Max: "Shit! I just lost him."

Jack: "Where did he go?"

Max: "I… I don't know. I can't see anything, there's a truck in the way."

Klein: "I see him, he turned left. Daedalus, he's moving towards your position."

Kyle: "I need to know which fucking direction Orpheus."

Klein: "West, on that big street towards the botanical gardens."

"Right, two blocks," Kyle said, "if I hurry can I intercept and follow?"

"Easily," Klein assured, and so Kyle set forth.

To reach his position, Kyle stepped off of the little side street, back onto the main street which he'd been just off of. This one was a thoroughfare, though most of the foot traffic on this street was happening at night, as it was mostly lined with night-clubs and fancy restaurants. However, a few cafes and shops sat open, and so a few cars were sitting at the curbside. Kyle was walking past one cafe, at the curbside of which was a large silver car, when a woman brushed past him, slowing him down ever so slightly when a man stepped out of a cafe in front of him, and as he'd made good time until then, he politely paused to let the man pass.

As Kyle stopped, he heard a click just at his back, in the direction of the woman who had just stepped past him. Before he could fully turn his head to investigate, Kyle was greeted with the feeling of a long, very sharp metallic spike being slammed into his back at an upward angle, followed instantly by that feeling Kyle dreaded the most, which he had so desperately

avoided since his first experience upon awakening from the vat; an electric pulse coursing through his body and musculature, causing jellification of his muscles, blurring of his vision, and body wide pain so extreme that I lack the language to describe it.

Somehow, Kyle was still conscious as his body fell forward into the arms of the man who had stepped in front of him. Perhaps the man was truly laughing maniacally, or perhaps that is a memory caused by the delirium of the pain, but either way, the man caught Kyle, who was still gelatinous as the back door of the silver car was opened, and Kyle's limp body shoved into the backseat. The backseat was quite large, and so Kyle fit in quite well, and in an instant, the opposite door opened, and the tall dark haired man who had loaded Kyle in sat quickly at the end of the backseat.

Kyle felt a surge of strength for an instant, and so attempted to sit up and push through the pain, but his muscles were too slowed to stop the man, who pulled a small metal box from his jacket pocket and clapped it against Kyle's neck. From the sides of the box came a metal band, which tightened around his neck, forming a metal collar, and in an instant, another violent pulse ran through Kyle's body, both from the new collar, and from the spike still lodged in his back. With this, Kyle collapsed once again, to the floor of the backseat.

"Is he down?" a woman's voice asked, miles away in the driver's seat. The man confirmed, and the car took off.

For a few minutes, the car simply drove, before another electric pulse coursed through Kyle's body, so that he barely felt a cut at the back of his left shoulder, and his tracking implants removed, and then driving for hours and hours, in a direction Kyle couldn't determine, as he received another pulse every few minutes.

“Why?” Kyle choked once.

“Because you are the Devil,” was the matter-of-fact, chilling answer which the French-accented woman in the front seat gave.

The drive lasted for hours, without stopping, and only rarely slowing down. The drive then ended quite as suddenly as it had begun. The car halted, and the back door was flung open, and Kyle, whose vision was slowly returning after the last pulse, saw as two persons in blue prison uniforms, with the same metal collars as his, reached into the car, each taking one of his arms and lifting him back to his feet. As he was lifted, the man in the backseat grabbed hold of the spike in Kyle’s back and yanked it out.

“Who are you?” Kyle choked to the pair lifting from the car, and both gave names, followed by serial numbers. These other prisoners were both synthetics. Already, through the haze, Kyle began to see the truth.

The car had parked, it turned out, quite openly on the side of a road. At this roadside was what can only be described as a concentration camp. Directly where the car had parked was an Uberconcrete block building, with a single gate in front. Stretching out from each side of the building was a triple layer of electrified barbed wire fences, forming a large compound, inside of which was mostly silence, though the occasional scream was heard.

Painted on the front of the Uberconcrete block of a building was a flag. Said flag had a dark blue background, painted onto which was a little bouquet of three white Camellias, with long green stems. Out of each cut stem flowed a single drop of blood. A glance up through his clearing haze showed Kyle that this same flag flew atop the building, and at each far end of the fence.

Feeling another flash of strength, Kyle's hand flew to his sidearm. Right as the electric pulse from the collar once again hit his neck, Kyle felt that, of course, his guns were long gone. He must have been searched at some point on the drive as he moved in and out of consciousness.

Once the gelatinous feeling caused by the shock had passed, which was much less severe than the others had been, the pair of synthetics, one male and one female, retook Kyle's arms and marched him through the gate into the concrete building. Neither of the synthetics who marched Kyle through the gate were as human passing as himself, given their rather plastic feeling skin and the obvious camera lenses in their pupils.

Once Kyle was through the gate, a spiked iron turn style affair which rotated automatically when approached, he was taken by the arm by a guard in black power armor and marched to a side room off of the walkway through which prisoners entered the Uberconcrete block. In this room was what looked like an over-sized MRI machine, and several more guards, in the same black power armor, which Kyle could make out clearly enough to see had the same emblem of the bleeding Camellias as was on the flag outside.

"You're a big fella," one of the guards observed.

"Just ask your mother," Kyle snarked. He was met with another pulse which collapsed him to the ground, feeling not a shred of regret.

After hitting the ground, one of the guards stepped forward and very rapidly cut Kyle's clothes off, presumably with scissors, and also removed his shoes. With this pulse, Kyle was fairly certain he felt an implant fry permanently.

In any event, Kyle felt as his naked body was shoved into a jumpsuit, no doubt identical to the ones worn by the prisoners who'd grabbed him from the car, and then his limp body lifted

onto a sort of stretcher which extended from the device which looked like an MRI machine. A gun barrel was pressed against Kyle's temple.

"What's your fucking serial number?" The gun wielder demanded.

"AB8-1305874," Kyle slurred, then added; "when I get out of here and I've killed you, and everyone you love, I'm changing it 123- go fuck yourself."

In response, the butt of a rifle was slammed into Kyle's crotch.

"You will never leave here," one guard said.

After another, slightly less severe shock, the bed retracted into the MRI-like machine, and inside, Kyle saw that it wasn't an MRI machine at all. No, descending from the top of the machine was a small hydraulic arm with a needle and thread, which descended and stitched Kyle's serial number into his forehead. Painful of course, but it was over almost instantly. When it had ended, Kyle got another shock, and felt another implant die, then he felt himself be carried out and thrown onto the mud in the camp compound, the rising sun creeping its way into his vision as it once again returned.

Kyle must have lain on the ground for nearly an hour before anyone saw him. It wasn't that Kyle couldn't move- the pain of the shocks subsided within a few minutes, and there'd been none further after being thrown to the mud. No, he lay simply because he could, taking stock of the situation, at least as much as possible whilst laying still.

The conclusions Kyle was able to draw at that moment were fairly bleak. While he couldn't see much from where he lay, Kyle could make out guard towers and prisoners barracks throughout the compound, which was perhaps 3/4 of a mile from end to end. He heard the occasional shouts from somewhere distant, but mostly silence. These electrical devices were the problem,

he knew. While Kyle had no doubt that if he remained alive long enough, the Medusas would find him, given that his tracker was gone, and he'd lost implants already, he doubted he could last terribly long. Of course, his soul byte data would re-upload to the Arasaka Net, but Kyle had a sinking feeling that his soul byte data had been damaged, not to mention his fear of what might come of him if rebodied; they might well remove his emotions, or sexuality, or both.

Thus, Kyle knew he had but one option; take the situation in stride, and fight for his freedom and that of his fellow synthetics when the time came. And so that must begin. And to begin it, Kyle sat up in the mud to take a full view.

Kyle's gaze was met almost immediately by a tall blonde female prisoner, another synthetic he assumed, as she also wore the same collar with the shock device. This synthetic was human passing however, unlike the others whom Kyle had seen since his arrival. As she drew closer, Kyle read the serial number stitched on her forehead; "AB7-86201."

The woman drew close to Kyle and stretched out her arm, which Kyle accepted, getting to his feet.

"Another AB model," the woman observed, "do you have a name?"

"I'm Kyle," Kyle replied, "the fuck is this place?"

"I'm Ilsa," the synthetic woman said, "follow me before we get shot for talking out here."

Kyle followed Ilsa over the mud a good distance, to one of the wooden longhouse barracks, which they entered. While from the outside the buildings were unremarkable, the housing for the prisoners was decidedly not. In the barracks were long Ubercon-crete blocks, at odd intervals containing cages with iron gates and electronic locks. It reminded Kyle of Battery 113 at Camp Hero.

Striding about the barracks were a few other prisoners. Kyle and Ilsa were the only human passing espionage models. All the rest were worker or combat models, judging by their exposed hydraulic joints, sex models judging by their exaggerated features and silicone skin, and a single geisha model like the one Kyle had slept with at the Arasaka estate. Most of the synths were of Arasaka origin, a few of Daishono origin, and still fewer unknown. Kyle doubted most of them could hold a conversation at his level, and so he turned to Ilsa once again.

"What the fuck is this place?" Kyle repeated.

"I can't say much," Ilsa said, with a meaningful look, then with hand gestures, indicated that the collars held listening devices.

Kyle asked back with hand gestures whether the barracks had cameras. Ilsa shook her head no, and so Kyle indicated with a hand gesture that she should write the answers to his questions in the air, and so should he. Ilsa nodded again; as an AB model, this was a skill she shared with him. And so both Kyle and Ilsa sat on the floor facing each other, and, drawing letters with their hands, communicated. As always, but especially so here, the conversation I'll relay is paraphrased, as I don't fully understand the shorthand Kyle and Ilsa used, based on visual memory alone.

Kyle: "What is this place?"

Ilsa: "A prison camp for synthetics."

Kyle: "Who are these people?"

Ilsa: "Terrorists. They're called Children of the White Camellia."

Kyle: "Sounds about right. How many of us are there?"

Ilsa: "40, this morning. We'll see how many come back from work."

Kyle: "How long has this been going on?"

Ilsa: “No more than a few weeks. I arrived a week ago and this barrack wasn’t quite built.”

Kyle: “How many have died in your time?”

Ilsa: “16.”

Kyle: “How does one survive?”

Ilsa: “Be perfect. They have someone who comes in and tests your implants once a week. When enough have been fried so that you can’t work, they take you underground.”

Kyle: “What’s underground?”

Ilsa: “Virtual interrogation for a few days, then your body is thrown in pieces topside.”

Kyle: “How many AB models have been through besides us?”

Ilsa: “Only one. Miyako, she’s dead. Her body was thrown topside a few days back.”

Kyle: “And our Soul Bytes?”

Ilsa: “I think they can corrupt them. Although maybe Miyako’s owner didn’t care enough to come. She said she was a Yakuza soldier.”

Kyle: “Who is your owner? Where are you from?”

Kyle was very sensitive about the use of the term “owner” when it was uttered by a condescending human tongue, but among his own kind, he was able to be more honest, even with himself.

Ilsa: “My owner is classified. I’m from Kreisler, in Heracles. I was a few systems away on a mission alone. I think they must have found me through the port authority scanner, or the scanner in the hotel I was staying in.”

Kyle: “Must be how they got me too. These fucking systems, treating us like animals waiting for slaughter.”

Figurative silence fell then, and Kyle got to his feet to take full stock. There wasn’t very much to see, as he’d suspected. Outside, Kyle saw a small crew of synthetics building another

barracks, overseen very closely by several guards, who kept just enough distance from the synthetics to shoot one down if they attempted to attack, not that there was any risk. These models weren't capable of free thinking.

For hours, Kyle and his barrack mates simply milled about in the barracks. No one dared go outside, lest they be spotted and given a shock or taken off for work, or worse. A few times Kyle thought of sleeping with one of the sex robot models in the barracks, but each time he began to move to do it, he lost the mood. And so he plotted.

"What work do they have us do?" Kyle at last asked Ilsa at one point. Perhaps this would provide an opportunity for escape, as there was not much of a chance from inside the compound.

"Picking up rocks and carving them, and then building that wall that runs the inside of the fence," Ilsa explained, "they're building the perfect fortress that can't be escaped. That's why there's so few of us now- they're waiting until they have an inescapable prison before they really start the killing."

Kyle shivered ever so slightly, but he also took some amount of comfort in it. If there was one bit of strategy Kyle knew worked, it was that the best enemy is one who is at once incredibly terrified of their enemy, and yet incredibly arrogant in one's own power. "Children of the White Camellia," whatever their esoteric motives, certainly seemed to fit the bill.

Eventually, of course, the hours of relative peace had to draw to a close. The doors of the barracks were flung open, and the several dozen synths who'd been on the last work detail entered, and then all immediately collapsed on the floor due to shocks. A guard with a glass pad in one hand and a rifle in the other stepped into the doorway.

"The rest of you, come with me," the guard said tersely, and the synthetics not collapsed to the ground followed.

Upon exiting, Kyle and the other prisoners were surrounded by guards and ordered to hold their hands above their heads while they walked. They walked first out of a back gate to the facility, and into the countryside. The area was fairly flat, and mostly grassland. Beautiful in its way, yet this scene of torture seemed to somehow suit the area perfectly. It would have looked out of place in another environment.

The prisoners were marched for quite a long distance, it turned out, across the grass and rocks to a large quarry. This quarry went quite deeply into the planet, and was used to carve the tan rocks which the walls of the fortress in progress were constructed of. Using crude implements, the prisoners would carve pieces of the rock, and then be given a piece of paper containing the proportions which each rock was to be carved into. As synths, no measuring implements were needed; they cut them perfectly every time. For now, the carved rocks were simply stacked to the side of the quarry.

At one point, a sex model synthetic, under violent ordering, picked up a rock which was too heavy for her, and her arm broke off. She was immediately gunned down by a guard on the spot, who then went on a rant about the fact that if synthetics couldn't work to their own destruction, they had no purpose.

For his part, Kyle kept his head down and worked, for a very long week, carving and eventually hauling stones. At times, Kyle thought of going at one of the guards with a hammer and chisel. But this, of course, was not a viable option. While he knew he could in an instant kill a single guard, it was obvious he'd not get past that point. Any guard, at any point, could down all local synthetics with a push of a button, perhaps with a pulse strong enough to kill, as Kyle saw multiple times.

Kyle also saw synths die from cumulative shocks, as even if one performed perfectly, one got at least two shocks a day, one

in the morning and one at the end of the day. A few new synthetics arrived in Kyle's time, none of them AB models. Before Kyle's time ended, Ilsa ceased function, and was dragged below ground via the mysterious armoured trapdoor which those who died were dragged to. The next day, Kyle saw her body, hacked to bits, laying in the pile next to the barracks which all "scraps" were thrown to as a reminder to the prisoners. Otherwise, nothing of much more of interest happened during this phase of Kyle's stay, though he never stopped looking for a way to escape.

After a very long week however, or perhaps slightly longer, Kyle was finished. His implants kept frying, and his musculature also began weakening to the shocks. His language chip also weakened; at one point he overheard two guards speaking, and it took him multiple minutes to decipher it. He also soon enough lost all sexual interest or functionality, though he did once quip to a female guard who insulted him that she should; "Come to his barrack tonight and find out." He received a shock for this of course, but he felt not a tinge of regret.

Kyle's time in the above ground section of the camp came to an end, inevitably. On one fateful day, the doors of the barrack were flung open, and all the synths were told to stand with their arms and legs spread, their backs to the bunks/cages, and wait for inspection. A moment later, a scientist entered; a short, brown haired woman in a long white lab coat, carrying an object which looked like a large supermarket scanner gun. Quite a few guards entered and stood around the barrack, and one stood directly next to the scientist, who went from synth to synth, scanning them one at a time with her scanner gun. Kyle would soon learn that she was scanning each one to see how many implants and functions were working.

When the scientist reached him, Kyle transmitted a message to her. By this point, his telepathy broadcaster had fried, but he made up for it with a stare which quite adequately said; "I can't wait to tear your head off and crush it to paste." The scientist quite audibly gulped.

As it turned out, this inspection was the one Ilsa had spoken of; to determine which of the synths was to be mined for information, then thrown to the scrap heap. The scientist went to the door, and called out the serial numbers of those who'd not passed inspection, and as expected, Kyle was among the four or five called. Too trapped to fight, Kyle went to the door, thinking of Max and Harune and his friends, and everyone else left behind. He'd known, given the life he lived, that someday he would die. But he'd always imagined it happening in a blaze of glory, with a roar. Not in an underground chamber, being disassembled, unable to even whimper in pain.

"You're going to live," a thunderous male voice from nowhere said in Kyle's head, "no matter how it looks, you'll come out, my Son."

An auditory hallucination? Perhaps. But to this day, Kyle swears it was the voice of Odin.

To the armored trapdoor all prisoners were marched, and the trapdoor was flung open. The inside was a simple Uberconcrete bunker, with seven rooms branching off the tubular hallway; four on the right, one at the far end, and two on the left, each one with a thick metal fireproof door, and each door had been spraypainted with a number.

"Put the AB model in 3," the scientist ordered, "when Marlowe gets in, he can take him."

Kyle was thus marched to the room at the end of the hallway, to the fireproof door with the number 3 spraypainted on it. The

door was opened, and Kyle wasn't so much nudged in as stabbed in at the diamond tip of a bayonet.

The room was not very large, and all red lit. On the wall to the side of the door were numerous monitors surrounding a seat which jutted from the wall. Off this wall hung a long cable with a metal and crystal spike at the end, and a set of electrodes. It was a neural interface unit, Kyle realized. In the center of the room was what looked like a metal autopsy table, with a VR interface unit, of probably the same model which the Medusas had for interrogations.

In this moment, Kyle saw that Ilsa had been absolutely right about the fate of those brought below ground. And upon seeing this, something snapped which he couldn't contain. With a roar like a lioness defending her brood, Kyle turned and lunged, his eyes locked on the gun of one guard. Alas, his dulled reflexes prevented victory. The guard stepped out of his grasp, and in an instant, Kyle was hit with another severe shock, turning his muscles gelatinous yet again.

Kyle was only peripherally aware as a guard drew a sword and cut off the arm that had reached for the gun, and still only faintly aware as his body was dragged to the room, and placed atop the seat jutting from the wall after his body had in some way been further cut down. Kyle felt a brief stabbing pain as the interface needle was plunged into his brainstem, and then for a little while, simple, blissful, oblivious blackness.

The sweet summer of oblivion came to an end when Kyle found himself blinded by the flash of neon white light. As his eyes grew accustomed, he saw that the room he was sat in was a standard interrogation room, and occupied by a single other soul; a short, chubby man with a receding hairline, who wore a lab coat. The name stitched into said labcoat was "Dr. Marlowe."

Kyle next looked down at himself. His body, at least outwardly, was fully repaired, but instinctually he knew that his strength had mostly gone. So he was indeed in virtual interrogation. With an eye roll, Kyle sat at the interrogation table opposite Marlowe.

Marlowe: “Your name is Kyle?”

Kyle: “Yes. Mr. Dellschau to you.”

Marlowe: “Do you know what I want?”

Kyle: “Frankly, you’re not my type.”

Marlowe chuckled.

Marlowe: “You’ve got some mouth for a slave. But at any rate, I’ll get to the point.”

Kyle: “About fuckin time.”

Marlowe: “I want to know everything. Your owner’s dial code, the dial codes of all company employees you know, everything. If you do this-“

Kyle: “What, you’ll fix my body, send me home, let me live a normal life?”

Marlowe: “No. But you’ll not die in pain from all the torture I’ll have to do.”

Kyle: “Torture? Just keep talking, that’s the worst torture I can imagine.”

A slow, demonic smile spread across Marlowe’s chubby little face.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Marlowe said, “so down we go.”

In truth, even had he been inclined, Kyle couldn't have given Marlowe this information. As a synthetic, one of the things hard coded into him was that it was quite literally impossible to give out information which could be used to harm his owner, his maker, or anyone he was assigned to protect. Thus, torture it was. As the simulation faded to black to start, Kyle remembered all Max had taught him about virtual interrogation and how to

survive it. He knew that the torturer would soon plunge him into locations pulled from Kyle's subliminal mind; places where he'd been afraid, or conversely, places where he'd been happy so that he might invert them. All of this would be even harder for a synthetic, who is incapable of disassociation or catatonia. And so Kyle steeled himself in preparation.

A note on the point of torturing a synthetic; as mentioned, it was impossible for Kyle to give out the information voluntarily, even under the most extreme duress. However, a tortured computer mind may eventually break in a different way; by a glitch forming in the AI, which can be observed by the torturer, and then exploited, at which point all code in the synthetic's brain begins spilling out uncontrollably. This process is known colloquially as "ghost hacking."

While Kyle did steel himself, there is, in truth, nothing that can prepare one for the tortures made possible by virtual reality, where one may be placed in any body, and made to endure anything which the interrogator is sick enough to imagine. The first batch was endurable, as the torments were only turned on Kyle himself. They became less endurable when they were turned on the memories of his sons, wherein he was made to witness things I legally cannot describe, over, and over, and over, and over again. Kyle held himself from exploding or glitching only by forcing himself to know that what he saw wasn't real. For the moment, this was doable, as Kyle had already consciously lived these scenarios. Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle glimpsed a feminine figure several times. Thinking it might be an exploitable glitch, he attempted to latch onto it, but failed.

At some point, very very abruptly as usual, the scene Kyle was in shifted. In this shift, Kyle found himself in a child's body. This wasn't unknown to him; he'd been in a simulated child's body in

other scenarios, both in this bout of torture and in the training scenarios practiced with Max. This scene was wholly different however.

For this scenario, Kyle, in the child's body, was at the center of an enormous black obsidian table, so enormous that his limbs were feet from any edges, even stretched out. He was naked, and his hands and feet shackled to the table, separated so that he lay in the shape of the Vitruvian man. Kyle looked around and saw that the black obsidian table was a 27 pointed star, with the points at the four cardinal directions larger than the rest. At the end of 26 of these points stood a figure, and the point at the southern cardinal direction was blank. In relation to the figures standing around at the points of the table, Kyle could see that the table was low enough for an adult to easily step onto. The room was all blacked out, save for a single spotlight above, which lit the table and the immediate vicinity.

25 of the 26 figures all wore priest robes like medieval friars, except for the color. 12 were black, 12 were red, and all in the black or red robes had their heads shrouded underneath bull's heads- real bull's heads, by the look of them. Two of the figures stood unshrouded. A vampirishly pale man with black, unfathomable eyes, whose robe was charcoal gray, and a woman with long dark hair, who wore a black sleeveless dress, her arms wrapped in silver bracelets, her hair held back from her face by a headband containing a wreath of red flowers.

Somehow, Kyle knew that the man's name was Aquino, and the woman's name was Lilith. From somewhere, Lilith drew a long obsidian knife and stepped up onto the table, while the man began to utter a chant in some alien tongue. Kyle, as he couldn't conceive of having ever been a child, couldn't imagine this was from his own subconscious, but one thing was for a certainty; this was a real memory someone had lived.

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!” Kyle screamed in the trapped little boy’s voice; “WHERE THE FUCK DID YOU GET THIS MEMORY?! I’M GOING TO FIND ALL OF YOU AND I’M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME?! I’LL FUCKING KILL ALL OF YOU! YOU ARE FUCKING DEAD YOU HEAR ME! DEAD! DEAD!”

I will not describe in detail the ritual which followed; I’m sure most of my readers are perfectly aware already. All I’ll say is that the entity which came forth was not an entity at all; it was a physical extraterrestrial which looked like a minotaur man, and his name was Moloch. This whole proceeding would bring Kyle sleepless nights for a very long time, but it wasn’t to last very long.

From the light in the ceiling, Kyle’s glitch descended, made obvious as a glitch in how she phased through the simulation’s characters without being spotted by any except Kyle. She was a young and naked Japanese woman, and would have been etherically beautiful even had she not glowed. Instinctively, Kyle knew who she was even before she reached out her hand to him and pulled him from the little boy’s body, which he suddenly stood next to, back in his own adult male synth body.

“Come with me,” the woman said tersely, taking the adult Kyle’s hand.

The woman and Kyle stepped off the obsidian table, and in an instant, they were in that mysterious plane known as cyberspace, floating freely in an ocean of pure code. Kyle observed some of the code, and saw that he and the woman were standing in the mainframe of the camp’s computer system. He had exited the torture simulation, and was now in position to fight it.

“Miyuko I presume?” Kyle asked, holding out his hand to shake; “The other AB model? I’m Kyle.”

“You’re on the money,” Miyuko said, “happy to meet you. I can’t believe that actually worked.”

Kyle: “What did you do exactly?”

Miyuko: “I uploaded my Soul Byte data into the computer when they had me on the rack. My body is dead though, and a lot of my data is gone. I can’t remember any dial codes.”

Kyle beamed at this news.

Kyle: “Well you’re in luck. I’m still intact somehow, for now anyway. Do they have comms out of this shithole? I’ll call in the cavalry.”

“Right this way,” Miyuko said, “I’ve never been so relieved in my life.”

Miyuko took Kyle’s hand and they swam a short distance through the sea of blocks of code, to that code reserved for the comms unit, which Kyle entered and manipulated to send out the following encrypted message; “Trace transmission. Immediate large-scale extraction required. Life or death. Expect armed resistance.”

Kyle sent this to everyone he could think of- all the individual Medusas, Prometheus, The Eagle’s Claw’s home computer, Yoshi Arasaka, Georg, Emmermann, Kruger Mercenaries, Fujimori Enterprise, even Wang Yu Nong received the message. How Kyle used this code system, I don’t think I quite have the language to describe.

“Now what?” Kyle asked Miyuko once he’d finished.

“Now we wait,” Miyuko shrugged, “nothing else we can do.”

Its possible to make time fly in cyberspace, and so Kyle and Miyuko did, having seen the security system for the camp in the mainframe, and knowing it would change when alarms started blaring and such once the base was invaded. They’d also seen the way to access the camp’s surveillance cameras, including the one to the room where Kyle’s body was held, and so right when

the first alarm started to go off, a number of hours later, but probably no more than that, Kyle looked into that room.

What Kyle saw wasn't terribly encouraging; his body still sat on the seat jutting from the wall, but it was in very bad shape. His left forearm had been cut off, and not very cleanly, and his left leg cut off at the hip, his right at the knee. His throat had a deep cut, and his torso a jagged horizontal cut which began at the crotch and continued up to just below the ribcage. But the neural interface needle was still in place, meaning Kyle could surf the mainframe and reenter his body to be rescued. The scientist who did the torture had disconnected the virtual unit, and stood beside the autopsy table, no doubt trying to decide whether to shelter in place or go and investigate the alarm.

Kyle decided to return to his body, but before doing so, he entered the computer monitors in the room, and put a set of words on the room's many monitor screens, words which he also spoke through the microphones on all of the monitors; "You poor, sad, stupid, godless fucking cunt."

And with that, Kyle surfed in data form back through the mainframe, reentering his body. He immediately felt the immense damage to his body. He physically could not move his right arm or speak, and either only his right eye would open at all, or it was the only one which remained photosensitive. Whatever the case, Kyle had just enough time to force his eye to roll languidly to the side and watch as the door to the virtual torture room was blasted clean off its hinges, and an instant later, the scientist called Marlowe's head be blasted off much less cleanly by a percussive plasma projectile.

A few moments later, two soldiers came into the room, both male Arasaka combat models, with rather obvious plastic skin. Both of them also obviously still worked for the company,

judging by their armor suits, which looked like those of futuristic samurai, and had the company logo on the left side of the breastplate.

"Captain!" one of the combat models shouted, "We have an AB model in here! He's cut up, but he might still be alive!"

Even this lowly combat model had the ability to speak like a human and show concern, Kyle noted, thinking of the group of so called humans he'd just been freed from.

A moment later, the Captain who'd been called for came rushing into the room. The half of Kyle's mouth which still worked curled into a little smile as he recognized Yoshi Arasaka. Kyle supposed he must have been the closest to receive the transmission. The Medusas must have left or been called off the planet in this emergency situation.

"Hello Kyle," Yoshi said, approaching; "my old pal, you look like absolute shit."

Kyle attempted to speak, but all he got was an outpouring of Blood-2 from his open throat wound, and so Yoshi put a hand on Kyle's shoulder.

"Hey, we need a medipod in here!" Yoshi shouted, then turning back to Kyle said; "Blink once for yes, twice for no, three times if you're not sure; can I unplug you from this interface?"

Kyle blinked once. With a nod, Yoshi gingerly leaned Kyle forward and very carefully removed the brain stem interface needle. In spite of the damage to his body, Kyle's nerves were intact, and so when his wounds were touched, it was excruciating, and Kyle was unable to say anything as Yoshi unplugged him and took him to the door of the interrogation room, where the medipod waited.

This medipod, from what Kyle saw of it, was white and rectangular with blunted corners, a gel pad in the bottom of the potion one was laid in.

“You’re getting a new body, buddy,” Yoshi said, “I’ll make sure it’s just like this one, only even better!”

Kyle made eye contact with Yoshi and tried desperately to send a telepathic message; “Don’t let them take my emotions or castrate me. Please.”

Either Kyle managed to send the message even without his telepathic antenna, or he imparted it by the look on his face, as Yoshi gave an understanding nod and a smile, just as the lid of the medipod closed.

For a moment, there was simple blackness. Then, the inside of the pod lit up pale blue, and at last, oh at last, the inside flooded with that ambrosial blue stasis gel which removes all pain and turns the mind to blissful, Elysian dreams. The last thing Kyle felt was a few electrodes lowering onto his forehead to interface with his brain and allow the medipod’s AI to keep his dreams good and peaceful.

For the full time in transit from the planet which housed Neu Koln till the arrival back at the planet of his birth on Triton, this was all Kyle knew; peaceful, quiet, often but not always erotic, dreams. Dreams of paradisaic islands and mountains, of the afterlife, of alternate realities where Tsurabaya and Andrew still lived, and where he’d never been a soldier, but had gotten to live peacefully on a paradise planet with his sons, his friends, and an endless supply of naked blonde nymphs. This came to an end briefly when Kyle felt himself be lifted from the pod and something begin cutting into his head, then black oblivion before “stasis brain” could begin to settle in.

For a short while later, or so it seemed, the stasis dreams resumed, but were soon gradually interrupted with the bath of white light, and the song Tsurabaya had designated as Kyle’s stasis wake up song, that being Joni Mitchell’s masterpiece “Both Sides Now.” For a moment, as the song played, Kyle knew

only the song and the white light, which transitioned quickly to blue, as the arousal phase of "stasis brain," set in and for perhaps 30 seconds, all Kyle felt was extreme, mindless, and very pleasant arousal.

Of course, when one is highly aroused, one generally wishes to move, and so Kyle attempted to do so, and thus came the first flash of reality, and with it the panic phase, as Kyle's body didn't move as he wanted, and he was hit with a vague idea that he didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there.

Kyle sat bolt upright in the vat, his head and eyes darting wildly from side to side in a scan of the same room he'd been born in, so to speak, as he clawed his mind for understanding.

"Dad! You're awake! How are-" Max's voice began from behind Kyle.

Kyle's head snapped around, to see Max standing up from a metal folding chair and walking towards him. In this state, when Kyle saw Max, the last images of him which went through his head were those he'd been made to see in the virtual torture, of unspeakable things being done to Max. In "stasis brain," Kyle couldn't yet tell what was real and what was not.

On a power that couldn't have hardly been his own, Kyle lunged out of the vat. As soon as his feet hit the floor, his musculature failed, and with his arms windmilling desperately, Kyle fell forward. Max caught him and moved him back to a sitting position on the edge of the vat.

However, "stasis brain," wasn't done yet, and so before Max could step away, Kyle wrapped his arms around his son, then buried his face in Max's shoulder, and for at least a full minute, carried out equal parts roaring, screaming, wailing, and sobbing as he clutched Max close.

"Mai Jung, Mai Jung, Mai schener Jung," Kyle kept gasping desperately in his native Silesian dialect.

(In English: “My boy, my boy, my beautiful boy.”)

As Kyle’s awareness returned, he saw that for once, Max was returning his hug in full and also crying.

“Dad,” Max sobbed, “we thought you were gone. I thought I’d never see you again. I love you Dad. Fuck.”

“I love you too Son,” Kyle choked.

At this point, the “stasis brain” more or less passed, and Kyle’s body decided it was time to expel all the stasis fluid from every orifice. Kyle hastily turned to Max’s side and stood, his muscles fairly stabilized now and his mind mostly clear, to let the purge happen. Max stepped away politely, and when Kyle was done, he saw that Max had also snapped back to reality, and was quickly wiping his tears and standing to attention in his usual way.

Still slightly shaky, Kyle sat back on the edge of the vat and looked down at himself. He saw that his height, muscle mass, skin tone, proportions, etcetera were practically the same as he was used to. Next, his hand went up and began feeling his face, to try and check if it had changed.

“I’ll get you a mirror,” Max volunteered, then stepped back to the folding chair he’d sat in waiting for Kyle, where sat a handheld mirror, which he handed over.

Kyle took the mirror, looking quite intensely at himself in it. His face and head, he was relieved to see, were all the same. Same jawline, same proportions, same dark blonde hair, same signature periwinkle blue eyes, though now his hair was in a close cropped military haircut and his face cleanshaven, as opposed to the civilian haircut and stubble which he usually wore these days. Finally able to relax, Kyle handed the mirror back.

“Where are the others?” Kyle asked; “Did they come?”

“They did,” Max confirmed, “everyone is here. But no one knew when you’d be waking up. So Auntie Fumiko came by and offered to take everyone out to eat, and everyone else went.”

“Why didn’t you go?” Kyle asked.

“I couldn’t leave you Dad,” Max said, then with a grin added; “Or perhaps they just couldn’t find me, given that I was sealing the deal with the coffee girl when they left.”

“You shameless little bastard!” Kyle laughed.

“But really Dad,” Max said soberly, “I wouldn’t have even done that if I thought there was a risk you’d wake up alone.”

Kyle smiled and patted Max on the shoulder. It was a touching moment between father and son, cut a bit short when the door to the vat room opened, and through it walked a woman in a business suit, obviously a saleswoman, followed by a finely dressed middle aged couple. Suddenly aware and slightly sheepish of the fact that he was buck naked and dripping stasis fluid in public, Kyle turned back to Max.

“I’m going to head for the shower room,” Kyle said, “did you bring me any clothes?”

“Yes,” Max confirmed, then after a glance around and not seeing the clothes said, “I think I may have left them at the desk. You sure you can get to the showers without help?”

“I think so,” Kyle confirmed.

Max left, and Kyle walked to the shower room. He saw that it was indeed now a proper shower room, with showerheads rather than a single hose as it had been on his last visit. Kyle stood under one of the showerheads and switched it on, feeling aglow with newfound peace at the rush of hot water which coursed over his body as he stood. As he washed, a pair of other synthetics came in to wash as well, one male, one female. Both looked and acted rather zombified, and didn’t respond to Kyle’s wave. In a few minutes Max entered, bearing Kyle’s clothes, a

new wallet, and a towel, and Kyle stepped from the shower to the single long bench running down half of the shower room. Kyle looked at the wallet first, seeing that it held his citizenship card, a wad of cash, and to his relief, the photograph of himself and Tsurabaya from Okinawa.

"So what now?" Kyle asked as he began drying himself, then added; "No, fuck that. If I'd been dead, what was going to happen to the unit?"

"Actually," Max said, "Opa was going to hand it over to me. I'm glad that's not necessary. Shit, you drenched me Dad, I'll have to burn these clothes."

Kyle looked and laughed as he saw that Max was indeed coated in stasis gel from his embrace, to the point that removing it would be impossible. Max glared back as Kyle laughed and began dressing.

"Is Harune here?" Kyle asked.

"No," Max said, "The Company, or I should say Sakura, has banned him from Triton, and anyway, the Academy wouldn't let him go, even when we thought you were dead."

"Right," Kyle said, swallowing his anger, "and so what now?"

"Dr. Tarakada wants to see you when you're dressed," Max explained, "and it's late, so I'm sure they'll give us the night in town, then it's straight back to Neu Koln. The mission is unfinished, but we got Sung's pattern figured before we'd realized you were missing. Phase 2 can initiate soon as we land."

Kyle finished tying his boots, then looked in the mirror which covered the wall, combing his hair down with his hands and giving a final adjustment to his clothes, which included his signature flight jacket.

"Right then," Kyle said, "to the good doctor we go."

Max nodded, then both men left the shower room behind, and proceeded through the plant to the manufacturing segments,

and then to the segment called "brains," where sat Dr. Tarakada. Kyle shivered slightly at the bodies being industrially assembled, knowing that he'd looked the same not more than hours earlier. He also began thinking of his life as he'd known it before, and of what he'd experienced and seen in the virtual torture, particularly when laid on the obsidian altar.

"Anyone home?" Max called up the stairs to Dr. Tarakada's office.

"Max? Yes, come right up," Tarakada called back, "is Kyle with you?"

"In the flesh!" Max called back, rushing after Kyle, who'd already started up the stairs. Max caught up just as Kyle burst into Dr. Tarakada's office.

"Back to form I see," Dr. Tarakada said, looking Kyle up and down, "have a seat, I have to conduct a language test, and then I'll explain your new body."

And so Kyle sat, himself studying Dr. Tarakada as she administered the language and personality test recounted already two volumes ago. With it concluded, Kyle having passed perfectly, Dr. Tarakada leaned back casually in her office chair, and Kyle locked eyes with her.

"I have a question, Doctor," Kyle said.

"Go on," Dr. Tarakada said, visibly slightly uncomfortable.

"Right," Kyle said evenly, "Doctor, what is my real name and where was I born?"

Dr. Tarakada gulped.

"You heard the man," Max said leaning forward; "where was he born and what's his real fucking name?"

"You don't need to swear at me to make your point," Dr. Tarakada said, then after another gulp, as she regained her composure, continued; "Kyle, you are ordered to deescalate, and explain what's brought this on. What have you seen or heard?"

And so Kyle told all the gory details of the Moloch ritual he'd been subjected to in the virtual scenario, including the details he couldn't have known that proved it was real. Dr. Tarakada was clearly very uncomfortable, and the more uncomfortable she became, the more detailed Kyle became, until at last he finished.

"Well," Dr. Tarakada said, "I have no doubt someone lived that. But Kyle, memory skimming is a common crime. Hackers surf the Arasaka Net and the stasis pods and steal memories. They can put those into virtual scenarios. I promise you Kyle, you were born in this factory. Now, let's discuss your upgrades, shall we?"

And so they did, for a bit. Kyle's reflex speed had been greatly increased, even as superhumanly fast as it already was, and his visual capabilities had received several upgrades. Now, not only could Kyle turn on a hyper-accurate crosshairs and zoom in with his vision, allowing for perfect aim, but Kyle had been granted x-ray and infrared vision, which he could turn on at will, by themselves or in combination with his sniper's vision, or in concert with his new third eye implant, which now allowed him to use nonlinear sight. His muscle strength had been more than doubled, as had the strength of his telepathy, him having been given a new transmitter of a fancy new model.

Kyle's artificial skin had also been upgraded, with a new, tougher type, even harder to cut. Perhaps the biggest upgrade was that Kyle had been given the ability to control his nerves, specifically, he could now turn off his pain receptors, making it possible for him to not feel pain in battle, thus being made unstoppable. Kyle had also been given the capability to psionically change the temperature of liquids, meaning he could literally boil the blood of his enemies. Lastly, he'd been given the ability to interface with biological beings in the same way he

interfaced with computers, even being able to do so with touch if they had implants.

“Dr. Yamazaki also… made it bigger,” Dr. Tarakada said at last, blushing and not making eye contact.

“I’ll stop by and thank him,” Kyle said, trying to suppress his own blush, and ignoring Max, who was chuckling uncontrollably.

“One last thing,” Kyle said seriously, reaching over and giving Max a swat on the knee to bring him back to seriousness; “What about electricity?”

“What? Oh, yes of course,” Dr. Tarakada assured, “you have an all new battery, as do your implants, they’ll last more or less indefinitely.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Kyle said, “I meant, have you made me less sensitive to attacks with electrical weapons?”

“Well, no” Dr. Tarakada said, shifting in her seat, “we couldn’t you see. It’s against the rules.”

“Why?” Kyle asked. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Max stiffening.

“It’s a fucking slave collar,” Max said in disgust, “so there’s always a weapon stronger than any synthetic.”

“I’m not sure I’d have put it that way,” Dr. Tarakada said, sitting up as dignified as she could.

“Well I would,” Max spat, “anything, so you fucking people can forget that people like my father are more human than you. The future won’t be the future forever doctor. I hope you know that.”

Dr. Tarakada and Kyle were both a bit speechless for the moment. Max leaned over and extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray on Dr. Tarakada’s desk.

“If that will be all Doctor,” Max said, “I’d like to go have an evening with my Dad.”

“Of course,” Dr. Tarakada said, standing, “you may go, shall I send someone to escort you out?”

“We know the way,” Max said shortly, stepping next to Kyle, and the men exited Dr. Tarakada’s office side by side. Kyle gave Max a pat on the shoulder, something similar to pride, but still, he was too stunned to speak. No, he was thinking now about too much.

Kyle and Max left the hallway, making their way back to the waiting area outside the vat room, where Kyle had undergone his first experience with the electric prods of those who saw synthetics as things to be controlled. Here, Kyle and Max rejoined the Medusas, along with Auntie Fumiko.

“I didn’t even know you were a synthetic,” Auntie Fumiko marveled at one point. Her words were addressed at Kyle, but her gaze was not.

“Well,” Jack said, “dinner, or just to the hotel?”

“Oh, the hotel!” Auntie Fumiko exclaimed, snapping out of her reverie and beginning to dig in her purse; “I have to call and get an extra room for Kyle!”

“No need Auntie,” Max said, “Dad can share a room with me.”

This hadn’t been discussed at all, but Kyle didn’t object, and so simply shrugged when Auntie Fumiko looked at him to see if such was acceptable. Kyle looked inquisitively at Max, who to his surprise, moved close and wrapped his arm around Kyle, a gesture which Kyle returned.

It made Kyle see something; for as tough and gruntish and Germanic as he was, Max loved his father, and had been traumatized by the experience of thinking he’d lost his father not once, but twice in his very young life, right on the heels of losing his beloved uncle. Kyle could see that Max didn’t want to let him out of his sight, and so Kyle decided he wouldn’t be, for as long as possible.

“It’s settled then,” Jack said, “I wouldn’t mind a second dinner. What sounds good Kyle?”

“Well this is New Kyoto after all,” Kyle mused, “so ramen? Katsudon? Yakitori? Something substantial, I feel like a lot of food.”

“I know a good ramen joint a few blocks away,” Saito volunteered, “bowls the size of a kitchen sink.”

“Lead the way Sir,” Kyle instructed.

The Medusas plus Auntie Fumiko left the plant, out onto the streets as the top level of New Kyoto, onto one of the trams, and a number of stops until they’d reached a block of pedestrian-only streets which seemed to be the de-facto street food zone, where they had a delicious dinner, stopping in at whatever tiny food stands interested them, including the ramen joint which Saito had mentioned.

As New Kyoto is underground, it of course has no sunlight, and thus uses an artificially set calendar and clock, which gives the citizenry very long “days” and very long “nights,” and thus, though it had already been evening when Kyle woke from the vat, the nightlife was just beginning whilst the Medusas and Auntie Fumiko ate. After dinner, Kyle and company headed for their hotel, on Level 2, while Auntie Fumiko took her leave. Kyle gave her a peck on the cheek in repayment for her paying for dinner twice in a day.

The hotel was indeed quite something, and in fact was more of a traditional ryokan, though much larger and with more modern conveniences, such as televisions built into the walls and toilets in the rooms. No bathing facilities were available in the rooms however; all bathing was done in the baths, which were real onsen, with real, natural hot water pumped in from real hot subterranean hot springs on Triton. The concierge handed the Medusas their keys, and to their rooms they went.

“Hey,” Kyle said suddenly as they reached the tatami floored hallway in which their rooms were, “where’s all the guns?”

“In Neu Koln, locked up in Prometheus,” David explained, “she wouldn’t fly until we’d found you. I left you a spare sidearm and knife in your bag with your stuff that was in the hotel.”

Kyle and Max entered their room. Max opened his own bag which sat on the floor and pulled out a change of clothes, which he began changing into out of his stasis fluid soaked garments. Kyle opened his bag, which had been left in the closet, and took out and then holstered and hid both the knife and sidearm David had left him, then took stock. He was relieved to see that all his clothes he’d packed, and all his money save that which had been in his old wallet, were intact. Now armed and with some more cash in his pockets, Kyle set for the door.

“Where are you headed Dad?” Max asked as he slipped into his fresh shirt.

“To the whorehouse!” Kyle exclaimed, rather loudly for the ryokan’s thin walls; “Time the give the new dick a spin.”

“You really haven’t changed,” Max snickered, “well alright, can I follow you?”

“With how you’ve been today,” Kyle said, switching his lecherous smile for a fatherly one, “I’m not sure I could keep you away. Come on, let’s have some fun before we have to work tomorrow.”

Kyle and Max slipped out. None of the others saw them, and the concierge was able to direct them to a brothel only a few blocks away, staffed entirely by synthetics, where for a couple of hours, Kyle, and presumably Max, certainly did “have some fun,” and Kyle left very very satisfied with his new body, making a mental note to mail a gift to Dr. Yamazaki as soon as possible.

With his base impulses satisfied, Kyle’s mind once again turned to the more esoteric wanderings it had been on, and so

he insisted on stopping in at a bookstore on the way back to the ryokan, where he purchased several books; a complete Eddas, a selection of writings from the Bhagavad Gita, a copy of The Diamond Sutra, and a pocket sized book with a modest selection of Shinto writings and prayers, and a non-spiritual book, which was a pocket encyclopedia of aliens. At last, Kyle and Max returned to the ryokan, deciding they'd take a bath before retiring for the night, and so upstairs they went to slip into the appropriate yukata robes.

"You go on ahead and change," Kyle said in the hallway, "I'll be there in a minute."

"Going somewhere?" Max asked.

"Just to talk to Joshie for a minute," Kyle explained, "won't take long."

Kyle knocked on Joshie's door, and Joshie's voice called out that the door was open. Kyle entered and found Joshie getting up from a kneeled position on the floor, already in his ryokan issue yukata.

"What are you up to?" Kyle asked.

"I… was about to say my evening prayer," Joshie replied guardedly, "do you need something?"

"That's what I came to talk about, after a fashion," Kyle explained, "do you have a Bible?"

"Oh," Joshie said, looking surprised, "I do."

Joshie turned to his bag and opened it, taking out his Bible, which he handed to Kyle. It was a small but not pocket sized edition, with a soft cover of real black leather, with a tiny cross of what looked to be solid gold on one cover. The inside was very fancy, with illuminated headings and chapter markers, full page illustrations in places, and gothic script in key verses. In addition to the Nicaean Canonica, this edition had a very

generous Apocrypha. It must have cost an absolute bomb, Kyle thought.

"May I borrow it?" Kyle asked, disbelieving that he'd asked such a question as he thought of what he'd been like so recently.

"Of course," Joshie said, "just please don't damage it. It's all I have left of Ireland. What's brought this on?"

"I've"… Kyle paused, thinking of how to continue; "I've seen things and heard things which I cannot explain. Don't expect me to change my lifestyle to be like yours or anything like that, but I need fucking answers."

"Then God be with you," Joshie said. Kyle smiled, thanked Joshie, and left.

The hot spring baths were indeed magnificent. Kyle and Max stayed in them a good deal longer than would have likely been medically recommended, at least for a regular human, but knowing that neither of them would likely have access to an onsen for a good while to come, they didn't care.

When they'd at last had enough of the baths, Kyle and Max retired to their room. They quickly realized that there was precious little chance of sleeping, as both their minds were racing. And so they sat on their futon beds and talked, just talked, all night, as they hadn't in years. They first talked of the usual subjects; weapons, women, and music. And then they turned to the serious.

To start, Kyle told his experiences. At first he tried to be delicate, but when Max asked tearfully for Kyle to not hold back, he told all. When Kyle had finished, Max told all. Of how the car which abducted Kyle had been traced, and then lost, of how Emmermann had promised Max the Medusas, of how it had been discovered that the camp had electronic suppressors on it blocking telepathy, and eventually, Max fully confessed his terror.

“Dad,” Max said earnestly, “please don’t fucking die on me.”

The emotion reminded Kyle of how he’d felt all those years ago during that mission in England, when he’d found Max chopped and eviscerated by Adelaide Dupree, and all the rage and terror he’d felt as he carried Max’s body for miles and miles back through the gate to Camp Hero for regen. Kyle scooted on the tatami mat and embraced Max.

“Good boy. Good boy,” Kyle choked, “I’m not going anywhere Mi Pequeño. Not now, not fucking ever. I love you so much Son.”

After this general interlude, the emotionality passed, or at least sunk in priority. The men turned their attention to the books on various spiritual traditions which Kyle had bought. In particular, Kyle thought of the Moloch entity.

Kyle had heard of blood Magick before of course; the practices of Dr. Maria Simmons and Sakura Arasaka came to mind. However, in his spiritual view up to that point, it hadn’t ever crossed Kyle’s mind that such practices could work, and yet they had; the entity the others called “Moloch” had materialized from mist to take physical form at the flow of the boy’s blood. Kyle also knew the memory must, in some way, be real. And so Kyle, with Max’s help, began scouring these books for references to blood magic and its results, for explanations of reincarnation or mystical out-of-body experiences, for any references to an entity known as “Moloch,” and any references to beings appearing from the mist.

Answers, or at least hints of answers, weren’t far to find. At first, Kyle skimmed the Bible, and indeed found reference to an entity called “Moloch,” who was connected to child sacrifice. Much of the Bible disgusted Kyle viscerally; The Old Testament for its lauding of Jewish murder of polytheists like himself and its expectations of parental control of children, and The New Testament for its ascetic expectations of male sexuality and

what he called “a tone of communist rassenschande,” there were parts he much enjoyed.

For instance, Kyle found the book of Daniel very entertaining and informative, particularly the narrative concerning Bel and the Dragon, and in The New Testament, he found great affinity with one particular verse, this being from The Book of John, chapter 15: verse 13; “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Kyle found far more of interest in the other books which he purchased. In the Bhagavad Gita, he found plenty of examples of out of body experiences and avatars. In the Eddas, he found the stories of Loki as a shapeshifter, and allusions to fog. Most useful, however, was the book of alien species, which was called “The Encyclopedia Interactum,” denoting that it was a list of aliens one might interact with.

In The Encyclopedia Interactum, Kyle found many references to aliens projecting images in order to appear as something else, or to appear supernatural in some way, many references to aliens which had the forms of animals, and several listed as drinkers of blood, both human and animal, either due to a biological need, or simple fondness.

The most revealing of the things which Kyle found in The Encyclopedia Interactum was that found in a segment specifically dedicated to aliens which had been on occasion worshipped as gods by various human cultures.

In this segment, Kyle learned of a species called “Taurans,” so named because they were the most politically powerful species of the stars which, when viewed from Earth, form the constellation Taurus, and the first species from said stars encountered by Solarens. Alongside the paragraph was a photograph of a Tauran; the one photographed could have been a twin brother of the creature called “Moloch” whom Kyle had encountered.

Still, this wasn't enough to convince Kyle all the way, no, what convinced him was a line in the description; "Taurans have a strong attraction to the blood of humans, particularly prepubescent boys. The Minoan civilization sacrificed young to the Taurans in exchange for gate access, and so apparently did certain cults who encountered the ancient Jews, according to the Desert Cult text "The Holy Bible."

Kyle found this information in pieces during the two week long flight back to Neu Koln. Not needing sleep, Kyle studied all day and all night. In the day in his bunk, at night in the lounge of the civilian transport ships which the Medusas took on the return to Neu Koln. Max often helped him out. In spite of him largely keeping his Norse religious practices and lifestyle for life, the studies changed Kyle a good bit. He began to see more of and experience the spiritual side of life, and to take more of an interest when he heard it mentioned.

Once they'd landed back at Neu Koln, rented cars, and checked back into a hotel, this time not The Blue Hanelian, Kyle took his songwriting book from his bag. It had been among his belongings which had survived his stay at the camp, as it hadn't been on his person at time of abduction.

On the night in Neu Koln before the mission was at last carried out, in the hotel room which Max once again asked to share, Kyle sat and wrote like a madman the song which I personally consider to be his masterpiece. It is the song of a time and space traveler in the purest sense, and Kyle also allowed strong influence from his recent religious studies. This song is the following.

'Twas in another lifetime,
One of toil and blood,
When blackness was a virtue

And the road was full of mud.
I came in from the wilderness,
A creature void of form.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

And if I pass this way again,
You can rest assured
I’ll always do my best for her,
On that I give my word.
In a world of steel-eyed death
And men who are fighting to be warm.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

Not a word was spoke between us,
There was little risk involved,
Everything up to that point had been left unresolved.
Try imagining a place
Where it’s always safe and warm.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

I was burned out from exhaustion,
And buried in the hail,
And poisoned in the bushes,
And blown out on the trail.
Hunted like a crocodile, and ravaged in the corn.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

Suddenly I turned around and she was standin’ there,

With silver bracelets on her wrists,
Red flowers in her hair.
She walked up to me so gracefully
And took my crown of thorns.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

Now there’s a wall between us,
Something that’s been lost.
I took too much for granted,
And got my signals crossed.
Just to think it all began on a long forgotten morn.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

Well, the deputy walks on hard nails,
And the preacher rides a mount,
But nothing really matters much,
It’s doom alone that counts.
And the one-eyed undertaker, he blows a futile horn.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

In a little hilltop village,
They gambled for my clothes.
I bargained for salvation,
And they gave me a lethal dose.
I offered up my innocence,
And got repaid with scorn.
“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you
Shelter from the storm.”

Now I'm livin' in a foreign country,
But I'm bound to cross the line.
Beauty walks a razor's edge,
Someday I'll make it mine.
If I could only turn back the clock to when God and her were born.
"Come in," she said, "I'll give you
Shelter from the storm."

Yes, "Come in," she said, "I'll give you
Shelter from the storm."

When he'd finished writing the song, Kyle sang it for Max in the hotel, playing it on his guitar, which he'd retrieved from Prometheus. His first performance was played over Neu Koln's blood orange and pink sunrise, a sight worthy of a much better audience than the drab business district afforded.

"Not the worst thing I've ever heard I guess," Max said with an impish grin.

"Fuck you," Kyle chuckled, then switched to mission mode before continuing; "so when do we move in on Sung?"

"After he gets off work," Max explained, "when he passes through an alleyway. He does it every night, because the drawbridge he gets to work across is closed by the time he gets off, so he has to go the long way, which means an alley."

"Do we have the means to subdue him if he's enhanced?" Kyle asked.

"Hofnitz has everything," Max assured.

"I suppose we'd best get into position," Kyle said, reluctantly setting aside his guitar and moving to load and holster his weapons.

“Yes, I suppose we must,” Max agreed briskly, moving to do the same as Kyle.

The Medusas regrouped, with Hofnitz showing off her syringe of anesthetic, which had the same concoction as that which had whisked Terence Rudolf Bruner into the sweet embrace of Morpheus for 36 solid hours. With all this in hand, the Medusas set off to the abduction point in their cars. Kyle drove one, noting how good it felt to be in control again, even though he was still on an errand which he had no choice but to participate in, on behalf of powers which couldn’t quite be comprehended.

The Medusas arrived in position without a hitch. They noted that both streets which the alley backed into were lined with businesses which were shuttered for the night, giving them ample hiding places. And so for hours, the Medusas simply bided their time on the street, eating and pretending to window shop with no intention to buy. It was tedious, but as the planet housing Neu Koln has rather short days and nights, not as tedious as it might have been.

Soon enough, the businesses began shuttering, and the Medusas moved to position. Franz and Klein climbed a fire escape to a rooftop in one of the low lying buildings overlooking the alleyway, and all the others broke into an antique shop, with Cheng picking the lock of the backdoor to it, giving them instant access to the alley. And so they waited.

“Car spotted on the horizon, driving expected route,” Klein’s voice said into the comms eventually, “Hades and I are moving into position.”

“All copy Orpheus,” Jack confirmed, then, turning to the others, added; “check weapons one last time, we’re in the home stretch.”

Using his newfound x-ray vision, Kyle viewed out into the alleyway. He watched as Sung’s car entered the alleyway, with

Sung clueless of his coming fate as Franz landed a perfect shot on Sung's front left tire, bringing Sung to a panicked, screeching halt in the alley, after which he leapt out of his car, cursing madly in Mandarin and moving to the blown tire.

"Engage!" Kyle ordered.

The Medusas burst into the alley, their guns drawn, lunging for Sung. Hearing them, Sung turned, and seeing them, drew a sidearm. From above, Franz shot the gun from Sung's hand before he'd even had a chance to move it into position to aim.

"No fucking monkey business," Jack barked as he stepped forward, grabbing Sung by the collar and fairly hurling him into the other Medusas.

Sung, however, wasn't taking it lying down. With a defiant shout, Sung swung his fist at the nearest available face, which happened to be Kovac's. She caught it, then kicked Sung in the chest, knocking him back to the alley. The fact that Sung's hand didn't break, and that Kovac's kick didn't kill him indicated that he was indeed enhanced. This was confirmed when Max quickly stepped behind Sung and restrained him, visibly having to put up a struggle as he did. To Kyle and no doubt everyone else's surprise, it was Cheng who stepped forward, bringing her face level with Sung's.

"Now listen," Cheng said icily, "we're none of us planning to kill you. But if you continue to act like a monkey's ass, we won't have much of a choice. So do we have a choice?"

"Yes," Sung said, and he didn't resist as Hofnitz approached and injected her concoction behind his ear, sending him to instant oblivion. Kyle stepped forward and touched Sung's forehead, interfacing to find the implants in Sung's body.

"He's got a tracker," Kyle said, "buried in the musculature of the upper left arm."

Sung's shirt and jacket were cut off of his body, then with expert precision and speed as always, Kyle cut into the musculature of Sung's arm, pulling out an implant which looked like a four pronged fishhook, which Kyle assured was the tracker.

"Alright, get the cars," Kyle ordered, "we take him to his house."

"Not the countryside?" Jack asked.

"He won't even be alive soon," Kyle shrugged, "may as well have him found in a normal spot. Don't want the pigs to investigate too much."

Apparently no one much objected, as the cars were brought around to the alley, and Sung was placed into one of them, and off towards Sung's house they drove. The house was quite a distance, it turned out, in a suburb to the northwestern side of the city, a ways around the side of a mountain. The suburb was far more aesthetically pleasing than the main city of Neu Koln, with stately old style houses and a town square, though still marred by the presence of cars. Sung's house was one of the largest in the suburb, and stuccoed in tan, built in the Mediterranean style of architecture. It was also shockingly insecure; Kyle had been prepared to take down a Daishono synthetic, or perhaps even multiple, given Sung's position. Perhaps he didn't trust his own company, Kyle thought. In any event, Sung was unloaded from the car, and carried into the house for interrogation.

"We have 11 hours until sun up when he's heading for work," Jack advised.

"I'll have him done in three or less," Max promised, already unzipping the rucksack which contained the virtual unit which the Medusas used for their interrogations.

Though Kyle indeed still had emotions, there must have been some reduction, at least in his empathy receptors, given that

Kyle didn't shudder at all seeing the same model of virtual unit which had been used for his torture being used on another for the same purpose. Instead, he simply sat on one of Sung's couches and watched the glass pad connected to the unit.

Max began the interrogation program as usual; in the white interrogation room, with himself on one side of the white table, and Sung in a straitjacket on the other. Sung looked around and laughed before sitting down.

Virtual Max: "I'm pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Sung. Let's talk business."

"Look, Mr. whoever the fuck you are," Virtual Sung laughed, "just tell me what you want to know. My boss is good, but he's not good enough for this."

Kyle felt a slight bit of disgust. In his samurai way, he had no respect for any man who would betray his boss, even when that boss was Kyle's enemy. But regardless,

Virtual Max: "I'm surprised."

Virtual Sung: "If I don't, what? You'll plunge me down into virtual, poke around and find my trauma, or better yet, lay me on a bed of nails and cut my dick off 500 times in a row?"

Virtual Max shrugged, grinning in apparent concession.

Virtual Max: "You seem to know how this goes."

Virtual Sung: "Enough to know that I don't have time to put up with it. So tell me what you want so I can wake up and deal with the headache."

Virtual Max: "I want all the security codes to Haverbeck Industries Tower. All access points, all you can think of, just think of it, and it'll go in the unit's log."

Virtual Sung leaned back in the chair, his eyes closed, thinking. Whomever was holding the glass pad flipped to another screen where the images the person being interrogated thought of would appear, and began watching these thoughts,

just as Max had taught them to do. Here, they watched as Virtual Sung thought of every entrance in and out of Haverbeck Industries Tower, and all codes one might need. The glass pad recorded all the while, ensuring that all the information was logged. This went on for quite a while, until Virtual Sung had reached the end of his available data.

"Another thing," Virtual Max said once Sung had finished, "are you aware that Haverbeck is Ayoko Daishono's doll?"

A pause.

"Yes. The question is, how the fuck did you know that information?" Virtual Sung demanded.

"I ask the fucking questions!" Virtual Max barked.

Virtual Sung shrank back ever so slightly.

Virtual Max: "Are there any Daishono plants on the planet?"

Virtual Sung: "Yes. The best way to get access is to take a prison van. The prison has a deal where every week or so, they drop off a certain amount of prisoners slated for execution at the plant. You could get ahold of one of the vans and drive it to the plant. They never search the vans."

Virtual Max: "When's the next shipment?"

Virtual Sung: "I don't know that. Only Haverbeck knows that, and he logs it all on a paper calendar, which he hides in a gene bank in his apartment."

Max telepathically reached out of virtual, asking if the Medusas felt the need to know anything more, and when, after a moment's discussion, it was decided they didn't, Max gave the all-clear to cut the simulation. Someone switched off the unit, and Max woke up. Sung, of course, did not, as he still had 34 hours of Hofnitz's concoction to work off.

"What now?" Joshie asked.

"Kill him," Kyle said matter-of-factly, already standing and unholstering his sidearm.

"Not like that though," Jack cut in hastily; "No, take him to a bathroom, take his clothes off, fill up the tub, make sure he drowns. We don't want the police to investigate."

And so it was done. To actually carry out the killing, Kyle carefully lifted Sung's now bare naked body to a standing position in the tub, and then, still with telekinesis, threw Sung roughly but not too roughly against the side of the tub, just hard enough for it to be believable that he'd slipped and hit his head hard enough to be sufficiently concussed that he'd not wake up underwater, which a mere mild concussion would not be sufficient enough to cause. Just to be absolutely sure, Kyle then held Sung under the water until the bubbles stopped, once again using telekinesis, which ensured there'd be no bruises not in line with a fall in the bathtub. It was a flawless execution.

"Poor bastard," Saito quipped with a sarcastic shake of his head at the sight of Sung's drowned corpse; "this is why I always take a woman with me when I bathe. Makes sad accidents like this less likely."

"What do we do about the car he left behind?" Klein asked as the Medusas exited the house.

"Nothing," Jack shrugged, "Mr. Sung had a flat tire, and some friendly tourists drove him home, and after they left, he decided to take a bath before calling a tow truck. Today was just not his day I guess."

The Medusas returned to their hotel to plan the next steps on the mission, by way first of examining the information recorded on the glass pad via Sung's knowledge bank. From it, they realized that the only way to access Haverbeck's apartment was via his personal elevator, climbing the outside of the building, or via the building's dumbwaiter system, as every apartment had a pair of dumbwaiters, one of which was used for food delivery, the other of which the residents also used to hand over their

trash. As Haverbeck's personal elevator was gene locked, and climbing up the side of the building would draw unwanted attention, it was decided that the dumbwaiter was the only option.

"I'll do it," Cheng volunteered. All eyes turned on her inquisitively.

"I'm the only one small enough to fit," Cheng shrugged, "and it's not as if Ayoko Daishono will suspect a Chinese cleaning lady to be capable of much of anything."

It was hard to argue with Cheng's logic on that front, and so it was decided that she would head to the apartment via the dumbwaiter which carried the building's trash. Accessing it was easy enough; at the end of every day, trash collectors would come and get the building's trash from depository room at the bottom floor of the building, which opened onto the alleyway. The trash collectors all wore the same blue jumpsuit uniforms, and like everyone else in this wretched city, never acknowledged each other's existence much. Thus, when Cheng had adopted one of these uniforms from a store in town which sold such things, blending in was almost too easy. Kyle stood with Franz and Klein on a rooftop, whilst the other Medusas waited on the street below. Franz and Klein had the order to only offer sniper's support in an emergency, as according to Sung's information, breaking any of the building's windows with gunfire would mean alarms and the arrival of police.

"I'm in," Cheng's voice came on the comms, "now entering the dumbwaiter."

"Good," Jack assured, "remember, be fast. Queen Bitch will have Haverbeck's memories on a backup, so it's only a matter of time before she knows he's been killed."

"Copy Ares. Arriving now, ending transmission," Cheng said.

With his sniper's vision, Kyle watched as Haverbeck walked to greet the arrival of the newly arrived dumbwaiter, and then watched anxiously as Haverbeck and Cheng spoke for a minute, before Cheng was beckoned into the apartment.

It was over in an instant. No sooner had Cheng unfolded herself out of the elevator than Haverbeck had turned his back and been shot in the brainstem.

"Target is down, moving the body now," Cheng said.

"Copy Alectrona. Get that calendar and get the fuck out," Kyle said.

Even knowing Cheng was as enhanced as she was, it was quite amusing to see her effortlessly lift Haverbeck's body, sling it over her shoulder, and walk through the apartment till she found the safe, which was hidden in a bedroom closet. Haverbeck's dead hand was pressed against it, and the safe unlocked.

"The calendar is here," Cheng said over the comms, "some cash too. Do I take the cash?"

Jack: "May as well, make it look like a robbery gone wrong. Now sweep for cameras and evacuate, Alectrona. Clock ticking down."

Within five minutes, Cheng had reached street level, and the Medusas quickly returned to the hotel, a few hundred thousand Bundesmarks richer, and with what was hopefully all the information they needed to infiltrate and bring down the Daishono plant. As it turned out, they did in theory. The next weekly shipment of prisoners was in a mere two days from the acquisition of the diary.

Joshie: "Perfect. Now how do we not get caught?"

Kyle: "Excellent point. Head for the shuttle, we're doing a flyby."

No one objected, and so to Prometheus they went, then loaded into one of her shuttles. Prometheus expressed relief at

seeing Kyle. Much like Max, she'd grown somewhat overprotective since his return from the camp, not that he objected, as he knew this meant she'd offer him even more sexual favors once they were alone.

With David piloting as usual, the Medusas loaded into a shuttle, and set off for the prison and the hidden Daishono plant. How they knew these precise locations, I'm unable to recall. I suppose they must have gotten them from Sung's information. In any event, they somehow had them, and set off first for the prison, then the plant.

The prison, it turned out, was very small. Just a single Uber-concrete block in the countryside. Kyle had the idea that it perhaps wasn't so much a prison as a holding spot for persons awaiting execution. The Breakaway, for all its successes, isn't known for being easy or fair on even the most basic and generally victimless crimes, hence why crime in the Breakaway is mostly only accessible to the very highest or the very lowest in Breakaway society. Whatever the case, the prison had a parking lot to its side, which housed several black vans, eerily alike those used for "supply runs." Thus, tracking the shipment would be quite easy, and intercepting should be fairly doable if the timing was right.

The next errand of course was towards the Daishono plant, which was quite a distance away, in the same grassland countryside as the camp run by Children of the White Camellia had been in. On the journey out, Kyle noticed something; there was not a spec of sentient extraterrestrial development on the surface of the planet which housed Neu Koln, indeed there was very little life on the surface at all, aside from plant life and a few species of birds and the occasional squirrel-like rodent. Kyle also noticed that none of Neu Koln's buildings had basements.

Thus, one had to draw the conclusion that the planet's extraterrestrial development was underground.

The Daishono plant was in yet another Uberconcrete block of a building. Kyle for one was becoming rather sick of the sight of them. This one, however, had an electric fence surrounding it, and much more importantly, a force field shield over top, meaning that blasting in with Prometheus's cannons likely wouldn't work. Thus, the more complicated Plan A would have to suffice. And so after returning the shuttle and gathering a few bags full of guns and charge packs, they returned to the hotel.

"Look up that last building on the computer," Jack said, "call it a hunch."

Someone looked up the building on their wrist computer, and saw that it was listed as belonging to the prison system of Neu Koln, as the designated point for executions. This changed the likely aftermath of the strike somewhat; it meant that either the prison system of Neu Koln was itself under Daishono control, and therefore ludicrously corrupt, or that one of their official facilities had been taken over without their knowledge. Either way, this added another layer of complication.

"Well," Jack said, "this means we have to speed up the time table."

"Precisely," Kyle said, "Apollo, you're going to wait in Prometheus. Have her ready to come pick us up as soon as we leave word. We're not staying here one fucking femtosecond longer than when we've destroyed the factory."

And so it was decided, and the time table redrawn once again, over the course of the last day before the strike. The kinks were ironed out just soon enough to give everyone a few hours sleep, and so most returned to their rooms to do so, or at least they pretended to. For their part, Kyle and Max were too wired and nervous to sleep, and so spent the night talking yet again, until

inevitably, morning came, and so they must mount the first stage of the attack.

To start, all the Medusas save for David headed out into the countryside, parking on the roadside to await the coming prison van. They parked the cars quite closely together and at odd angles, so that it might look as though a small pileup had taken place here. If the prison guards doing the transport were decent, they'd stop to investigate, especially once they saw Kovac standing beside the cars looking upset. But, just in case these guards weren't the chivalrous type, Franz and Klein crouched in the grassland a short distance along the road, ready to take them out through the van's windows. The idea however was to accomplish this stage with as little damage or bloodshed as possible.

As it turned out, their gamble paid off. The prison van with its moribund cargo ground to a halt, and two guards in black riot gear emerged from the van, removed their helmets, and approached Kovac.

"Miss? Are you alright? Do you need-" one of the guards began.

Kovac snapped her fingers, and the others emerged with their guns drawn from their hiding spots in the reeds in the gulley which ran next to this section of road. The Medusas began surrounding the armored black van, and approaching the guards. Quick as a flash, the guards drew their own guns, and just as quickly, these guns were blasted out of their hands.

Kyle pulled out his passport and opened it, then approached the pair of helpless guards.

"Sorry it had to be done this way boys," Kyle said briskly, "I'm Captain Kyle Dellschau of the Prometheus, and on behalf of Admiral Emmermann, I and my men are commandeering this transport and your gear. Hand me the keys please."

Too stunned to even speak, one of the guards handed over the keys to Kyle, who tossed them over to Saito. With a nod, Saito rounded the van to unlock it and get the prisoners out.

“Leave them tied up!” Jack called out.

“What the fuck is this?” one guard demanded, finally hanging regained the power of speech.

“Excellent question that you’ll never know the answer to," Max quipped, "now we need your gear so we can look the part. Achilles, their gear looks about our size, we can ride in front.”

The whole procedure was over in less than two minutes. Max and Joshie, in the riot gear, rode in front, Joshie driving, with all the others in the prisoners compartment, now rejoined by Franz and Klein. The guards, now sans gear, and the real prisoners, still in uniform and hog tied, were left at the roadside. Kyle watched out the van’s back door as one of the guards pulled a second hidden sidearm from somewhere and began executing the prisoners where they stood.

The drive ahead was quite long still. The Medusas in the back of the van spent most of it double, triple, and quadruple checking their firearms, sharpening their knives, etcetera, until at last Joshie called from the front that they were on the approach to the Daishono plant.

“What’s the plan of engagement?” Max asked from the front.

“Simple,” Kyle said, finishing snapping on his helmet, “if it’s moving or breathing, you kill it. They can look for vengeance in Valhalla.”

The van pulled to the gate, which had a fairly standard setup of a small white building where the guard sat, granting access through the electric iron gate. Here, Joshie gave the password which one of the prison guards had passed on; “Tafelsalz.” The Medusas didn’t begin the engagement here; though it was

possible, it wasn't the most advantageous. As Sung had promised, the van wasn't inspected.

Joshie pulled the van past the gate into the large parking lot which surrounded the plant. On the side of the building was a hangar door, one of the large roll up kind of flimsy metal, helpless against an armored van. Joshie paused, waiting for order. Kyle, Cheng, and Kovac all closed their eyes, applying nonlinear sight. After a moment, all opened their eyes again, looked at each other, and smiled.

"Step on it," Kyle ordered. And so Joshie did.

The armored van charged forward, smashing through the hangar type door as though it was made of toilet paper, headlong into a large warehouse style room. Joshie shrieked the van to one side, then slammed on the brakes. Instantly, both Max and Joshie leapt from their seats, crawling low to begin scrambling into their armor suits, which lay at the back of the van. Franz raised a recoilless rifle which Buchner had loaded before the trip and aimed it at the van's windshield, which was already surrounded by Daishono synths.

"Backblast zone clear?" Franz called as he took aim.

"Backblast zone clear!" Klein confirmed.

The explosive warhead of the plasma projectile not only destroyed the cabin of the van, but also the several Daishono synthetics who'd begun clawing in. The damage left a wide open entrance into the plant for the Medusas.

"Everybody out!" Kyle ordered; "Stay huddled and let's fuck them up!"

In an instant, the Medusas piled out of the gaping hole where once had been a van cabin and stood on the Uberconcrete floor of what was clearly the Daishono plant's manufactory. No one had time to look around much at anything which wasn't moving, but a cursory glance showed that filling most of the

warehouse space was a sprawl of enormous factory machines which, in gradual successive order, built synthetic bodies. Attached to one machine was a conveyor belt with a row of human heads, real human heads judging by the caked dried blood at the point where the neck was cut. Kyle thumbed the switch on his rifle to the under-the-barrel grenade launcher and blasted this machine before turning back to the battle at large.

From out of seemingly every available orifice, Daishono synthetics charged, along with a fair few armed human guards. Most of them were gunned down before they could get very close, but with the speed at which the synthetics moved, a number of them got too close to be easily shot, and so hand to hand combat became necessary.

The first Daishono synthetic who reached one of the Medusas was immediately slammed to the ground and had his head stomped, and popped like a balloon filled with blood. With this, it became obvious how these synthetics were made; they had real human heads, grafted onto cybernetic constructs. Now, when Kyle killed one, he felt glad of it, not only because he was destroying his enemies, but because now he was releasing their soul from living in such a body. He made sure from that point on that all the synthetics he downed had their brainstems destroyed.

At one point, Kyle saw a short, stocky scientist attempting to escape via the opening where once had been the door. Having an idea, Kyle leveled the rifle and shot off one of the man's legs below the knee, the plasma projectile cauterizing the wound, leaving the man able to be taken hostage.

One synthetic, a red headed female, took exception to this particular act of carnage, and so with a banshee like scream, charged at Kyle, deflecting his shots with superhumanly fast flicks of the two plasma edged swords she carried. Kyle dodged

the swing of the two blades, sidestepping behind the synth and grabbing her right arm, which he ripped off, then impaled her through the brainstem with the newly liberated sword, which he then telekinetically threw in an arc, decapitating two armed guards before pulling the sword back telekinetically.

The initial phase was quite bloody, but very brief, and other than a few armor dents or scratches, none of the Medusas sustained any damage. When all in the first wave of synthetics had fallen,

"Fuck up the machines," Jack ordered, "then reload, and we go deeper."

Kyle glanced over the equipment in the warehouse area, getting an image of the Daishono way of things before the equipment was destroyed. He saw that the Daishono system was a good deal simpler than the Arasaka method. First, the body was hung up by a meathook through the back, then conveyed like dry cleaning to a laser, which decapitated the body. The heads were then grafted onto pre-built cybernetic bodies, and then the completed synths deposited into glass tubes on wheels, presumably so they could be sold. Kyle smiled with delight as this infrastructure faced a volley of plasma grenades.

Kyle followed the others back to the van and rapidly reloaded his guns, as everyone was doing, then tapped Saito on the shoulder.

"Argonaut with me," Kyle said, "the rest of you head on. They could send reinforcements any minute."

Saito followed Kyle over to the crumpled mass which was the man with his leg blown off. Kyle grabbed the man's collar and lifted him up to eye level.

"What's your name?" Kyle asked.

"Paulie," the man said tearfully, "please don't kill me!"

“Well Paulie,” Kyle said in the condescending tone he’d use on a toddler or a dog, “this is your lucky day. You’re our new human shield. Argonaut, give this man a hand.”

Kyle handed Paulie over to Saito, who in turn threw Paulie over his shoulder, as though he was carrying a rug. At this, Kyle and Saito rejoined the others, who were beginning to look further through the facility, bypassing the rubble of the destroyed conversion equipment. Footsteps were heard on the catwalks above, and all whirled to look, seeing several armed guards taking positions above, apparently thinking they weren’t being observed.

“Fire at will,” Jack said dryly. The guards didn’t live to see the next five seconds.

“Where next Stumpy?” Saito asked.

“Up the stairs. That’s where everything is,” Paulie said, then added, “wait, there’s a server farm. You can shut off the security system there. It’s through that set of doors off to the side.”

Paulie pointed weakly to a black painted fireproof door set into one of the Uberconcrete walls of the manufactory. Kyle gestured Max to follow him and Saito in that direction. Jack nodded, and set up the stairs to head further into the plant.

Kyle, Max, and Saito, with Paulie still slung over Saito’s back, approached the metal door. Set into the wall at its side was a digital keypad, which Saito backed up to.

“Open the fucking door,” Kyle said, and Paulie typed the code.

The door slid open, revealing a server farm a few steps down in the Uberconcrete room beyond, a few inches of water on the floor for cooling. Out of one set of servers jutted a chair with an interface needle at the end of one of the usual cables. The room wasn’t very big, but there were still a few spots not in immediate sight.

“Heracles, clear the room,” Kyle instructed, and Max set into the room, his gun raised, to do the sweep.

As Max stepped into the room, Kyle lifted Paulie from Saito’s shoulders and set him on the ground up against the Uberconcrete wall.

“I have a few questions,” Kyle said, “is this a Daishono facility?”

Paulie nodded earnestly, tears still streaming down his face.

“Good boy,” Kyle said in the patronizing tone again, “and do you swear on your mother’s life that you’re not trapping us? That we can access this entire base’s security in that server room?”

“I swear, I swear,” Paulie sobbed, “please let me go.”

“Alright,” Kyle said, “I’m letting you go.”

Kyle nodded to Saito, who understood, and stepped next to Kyle. Paulie had leaned back against the wall, his eyes clamped shut as he cried in relief.

“Thank you for your service,” Saito said, raising his gun and blasting Paulie’s head off; “Long live the Queen.”

“Long live the Queen,” Kyle echoed, slightly stunned at such a display from Saito. He also wondered which “Queen” was being referred to; Old Lady Daishono, in a sarcastic sense, or Sakura Arasaka, in a genuine sense? It was fitting either way.

“All clear,” Max’s voice said from the doorway of the server room.

Kyle and Saito entered the server room. Kyle sat in the chair and removed his helmet, and carefully, Max inserted the interface needle. Kyle had hoped perhaps the base contained a self destruct sequence; this was not to be. However, he was able to shut off all security measures including, most crucially, the force field shield which surrounded the base, leaving it open to aerial bombardment. With this all done, Kyle gave Max and

Saito the all-clear to unplug him, and as they did so, he sent up a telepathic signal to David; “Ready the cannons and be at the extraction point.”

Kyle, Max, and Saito left the server room, and proceeded up to the second floor of the facility, finding that one of the catwalks led to the inside of the facility proper. The other Medusas had made it at least that far successfully, judging by the body hanging out of the door. And so the trip followed, finding themselves in a very drab white office hallway, and so they followed the bodies along until they reached the remaining Medusas, who stood in the doorway of a large office, holding up a typing pool at gunpoint. When Kyle and company arrived, they opened fire.

And so the raid continued. Most of the potential opponents which the Medusas encountered were unarmed office workers, who were shown not a drop of mercy. They were the enemy, and had subverted justice by turning the criminal element of Neu Koln into soldiers for purchase and hire.

One of the rooms which the Medusas encountered was a laboratory, empty now. On shelves lining several walls were large jars filled with stasis fluid, containing several human heads each. Each of these shelves received a plasma grenade, freeing the souls from their crowded little prisons of liquid and glass.

The Medusas encountered no more armed resistance on the second level, not for most of the third, which had a few windows and skylights out. The Medusas looked out of one of these and saw Prometheus arriving and lowering onto the parking lot. The sweep of the third level had mostly finished when they encountered armed resistance.

An armed male synthetic, his head pulled from the body of an Asian man, came bursting out of a closet, wielding a large gun.

The synthetic screamed, and though he was cut down in an instant by a roar of gunfire, he still got off a single good shot, which cut the shoulder of Kovac's armor, leaving a gaping cauterized wound. Kovac staggered and collapsed against a wall, screaming in pain. Hofnitz and Max knelt at her side.

"How bad is it?" Max asked.

"Bad," Hofnitz confirmed, "she needs a tank."

"How much of this shithole is left?" Buchner asked.

"Not enough," Kyle said decisively, "not enough for any more risks. Let's get the fuck out."

Kyle went back to one of the large offices they'd passed, which had a large window. With a plasma grenade, Kyle blew out the window, then called out to the others, and in turn, they all jumped the approximately 30 feet to the ground, including someone with Kovac slung over their back. The boots of their armor suits absorbed the landing as easily as if they'd simply stepped off a few inches. Jack ordered whoever held Kovac to head on to Prometheus, and the others returned to the destroyed van, gathering what charge packs they'd left behind, then they also headed for Prometheus and boarded. Kovac had been laid out on the hangar bay floor, and Hofnitz rushed off to get a medical kit, while most of the others hurried onto the bridge.

"I'll call my Father," Jack said, "get a tank ready at one of the houses."

Kyle nodded, then entered the bridge, instructing David to angle Prometheus down so that the now thoroughly assaulted Daishono facility was in full view. Kyle smiled, and spoke to Prometheus.

Kyle: "Prometheus?"

Prometheus: "Yes, Captain?"

Kyle: "See that compound down there?"

Prometheus: “I do.”

Kyle: “Good. Blow it all to shit.”

And in a rain of cannon fire, the Daishono presence in Neu Koln was, at last, brought to a very decisive end.

Author's note. Quite a lengthy and tumultuous chapter, of an already tumultuous part of Kyle’s life. Before it can conclude, I must tell one last story, which was the final nail in the coffin of any tranquility which Kyle may have found.

Chapter 23

The immediate aftermath of the anti-Daishono operation went without a hitch, in the surface sense anyway. Emmermann, very pleased at the news of success, invited all the Medusas to his Centurion home. As the trip to it was roughly the same length as a trip to Mars, Hofnitz put Kovac into a medically induced coma, though not one so severe as to make breathing impossible, then laid her very carefully on a top bunk, surrounded by padding, with nutritional fluid on a constant intravenous drip. This, Hofnitz assured, would keep Kovac alive and not in pain until she could have a dip in the tank.

"Will she dream?" Kyle asked, as Hofnitz finished explaining all this in Prometheus's lounge, Prometheus herself still in the loose orbit of the planet which housed Neu Koln.

"Yes, I suppose so," Hofnitz mused, "she's got full neural connectivity after all. Why?"

Kyle turned to Max.

Kyle: "Kid, the virtual unit; you connect it to her head, and play some auto-loaded programs, she'll see those while she's under, right?"

Max: "Yes, she will."

Kyle: "Good. Hook her up whatever kind of shit you think she'd like, for the whole trip."

Max: "I can Dad. But why?"

"Gods fucking dammit!" Kyle shouted, shooting up from his chair; "Do I have to fucking explain it? She took a bullet for you. All of you. Do the rest of you faggots know what that's like? Yes,

you do. You all fucking do. You're soldiers, that's what we fucking do- we take bullets for our fucking friends!"

"Kyle," Jack began, getting up and stepping forward, "you're"-

"I'm not fucking done yet is what I am!" Kyle shouted, his voice so booming that Jack practically recoiled into his seat. A bit more calmly, and now struggling to not let his voice crack, Kyle continued; "She's all alone in there until she wakes up. What if she has a nightmare and she can't wake up? Do any of you think she fucking deserves that?"

"Of course not," Max said quickly, standing up and giving Kyle a pat on the shoulder as he passed; "I'll go set her up in virtual now."

"What are you all fucking staring at?" Kyle demanded, his voice cracking; "This isn't fucking Broadway. Man your stations."

Of course, this wasn't really about Kovac, which Kyle admitted as soon as he reached the "core room," where none could disturb him.

"Prometheus," Kyle said earnestly, the tears no longer wishing to flow; "I don't know what to do. I can't stop seeing it."

Of course, by "it," Kyle meant the Moloch ritual. He'd fancied himself to have moved on, but of course, this was just the denial phase of both righteous rage and grief. These two emotions generally have the same stages, and having exited the denial phase when the distractions passed, Kyle was entering the anger phase of both emotions; righteous rage towards Aquino, Lilith, and the masked perpetrators, and grief for the sad, scared, confused, and most of all lonely little boy who had suffered at their hands on that obsidian altar, to appease some "God" who would've fallen with a single gunshot wound to the crotch, had Kyle been there.

To calm himself, Kyle returned to study in the day, and Max, the only one who seemed to truly understand what was going on, joined him in this endeavor for the trip to Centurion. Max, for once, kept his mouth shut when necessary, and when Kyle leaned in to hug him, Max hugged back always.

Once actually on Centurion, Kyle satiated his blood lust with more traditional lust. During the few days vacation, Kyle was more voracious with Emmermann's maids than he'd ever dared be in the past, not that Emmermann minded, and in fact he encouraged it.

Kyle also satiated his blood lust while on Centurion in another traditional way; hunting. Kyle, again usually with Max in tow, set off for the jungles often with his guns, taking down large predators. Again, Emmermann encouraged it. It calmed Kyle a good deal, and he felt his humanity fully return, for the moment at least, on one particular hunt after he, almost not meaning to, shot a large, heavily pregnant snake, then felt horrible guilt about it. But alas, Kyle's journey through the underworld of his own psyche was far from over. But it was at least in a lull when the Medusas were sent back to Fort Worden, rather than back to Mars as they'd mostly expected.

The next shock came not even two days after the return; Kyle and Max were, as usual, seated on the apartment couch, watching whatever bootleg film they'd chosen, when Kyle got a message on his glass pad.

I can't say what forces guided what came next, if it was some type of God, whether that be a kind guide, a malevolent monster, or a childish joker, or the all-knowing AI running Project Phoenix deciding to change Kyle's life for some unfathomable reason, Emmermann or Prometheus exerting their similarly incomprehensible tentacles of invisible influence over pulling Kyle's psyche, perhaps Dr. Tarakada, or perhaps even

Jack or Max, though these last two deny it to this day. Whatever the case, Kyle picked up his glass pad, hoping for a violent and sexy mission to come, as usual.

"Mission?" Max asked, taking in another fistful of stovetop, real butter popcorn.

"Yes," Kyle said, "odd. Just a gopher quest. I'm to take a box of files to one of the satellites. The Presidio it's called. Where the fuck is that?"

"California I think," Max explained, "I had to take files too once. Gods, they must be short staffed. Will you be back in time for dinner?"

"Definitely," Kyle said, already slipping into his jacket, then paused; "it's odd though. They don't give me an office to take them to. Guess I'll find out when I get there. Maybe don't wait up. And if you have any girls over, don't leave a mess on my goddamn couch!"

"No promises," Max chuckled. Kyle smiled and left.

Kyle went first for the box of files, which awaited him at Battery Kinzie, and then, following the direction given by the secretary, he walked through the permanent portal to The Presidio which Fort Worden had, to a time bubble version of course, like all bases within Project Phoenix.

As I'm sure most of my readership is perfectly capable of looking up The Presidio in their preferred search engine, I'll not describe it, at least not in this chapter, as there's more important business to come very shortly, which kept Kyle from looking around much at the time. All he saw was that he'd come out onto a pleasant walkway besides the San Francisco Bay, with the Golden Gate Bridge (an interesting name, all things considered) off in the distance.

Kyle was met immediately by a girl; short, with blonde pigtails, her outward appearing age not a day over 15, in a white

blouse, pleated black miniskirt, and knee high socks. This girl was the definition of "cute," and in an instant, Kyle saw through it; this girl was evil to the core.

For the moment, Kyle said nothing, allowing the girl, who didn't volunteer her own name, to lead him to one of the Spanish Colonial buildings on The Presidio's waterfront, then up some concrete stairs to a hallway of green wooden doors.

"End of the hall," the girl said with a perky smile.

Already somehow knowing what was to come, Kyle galloped to the end of the hallway, his arms still full of files, and then using his telekinesis, flung open the door.

Behind a metal desk stood a man, dressed head to toe in black. He spun round at Kyle's flinging open of the door, and Kyle saw his face; he was Aquino.

"I'M GONNA FUCKING KILL YOU!" Kyle screamed, dropping the files on the ground and drawing his sidearm, raising it to blow away this American man who exuded evil.

Author's note. And so ends Volume 4, the volume which I'd looked forward to. I hope, as I sign off, that I can have imparted all I hoped and tried so desperately to. Until next time, friends; stay tuned.

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